

Rahab Welcomes Spies

Devotional Reading: [Matthew 25:31–46](#)

Background Scripture: [Joshua 2; 6:16–25; Matthew 1:5; James 2:25; Hebrews 11:31](#)

[Joshua 2:8–13](#)

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 you this land 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 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.

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.”

[Joshua 6:16–17](#)

¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city! ¹⁷ The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent.



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Key Text

The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent.—Joshua 6:17

Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem

Unit 1: From Nomadic Tribes to Settled People

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize what Rahab and the people of Jericho knew about God.
2. Explain how Rahab's knowledge of God influenced her and led to Jericho's defeat.
3. Recall an instance when God used an unexpected person to accomplish his will.

Lesson Outline

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Conclusion

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B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Amorites *Am-uh-rites*

Canaanite *Kay-nu-**nite***

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*

Elohim (Hebrew) *E-lo-heem*

Herod *Hair-ud*

Jericho *Jair-ih-co*

Rahab *Ray-hab*
Sihon *Sigh-hun*
Yahweh (Hebrew) *Yah-weh*

Introduction

A. Help in Surprising Places

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the United States, resources were developed to help liberate people experiencing enslavement in the South. One such resource was an informal network called “The Underground Railroad.” It was never an actual railroad but a series of safe houses and routes that assisted enslaved people in their escape to free states and Canada. Along the route, many people risked their lives and livelihoods to aid those traveling along the “railway.”

One notable “conductor” was an abolitionist named Levi Coffin, Jr. (1798–1877). Born in North Carolina, Coffin was an unexpected figure in the abolition movement, having been born and raised on a farm in the South. Despite this background, he and his family opposed slavery and took significant steps to educate enslaved individuals and shelter those who had escaped. In 1826, Coffin moved to Indiana, where, for the next twenty years, his home was a significant stop on the Underground Railroad. Travelers designated the stop as the “Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad.”

God often uses people in surprising ways. Last week’s lesson covers the events of the Israelite conquest of northern Canaan ([Joshua 11](#); see [Lesson 3](#)). In today’s lesson, however, we take a step back in the timeline to examine how a non-Israelite surprisingly chose to assist the Israelites as they entered the land of Canaan.

B. Lesson Context

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites were on the verge of crossing the Jordan River into the promised land. Moses had died, and the new leader, Joshua, initiated the conquest by sending two spies on a reconnaissance mission to evaluate the land of Canaan in general and the city of Jericho in particular ([Joshua 2:1](#)). During Moses’ leadership, the Lord commanded that twelve spies be sent into the land ([Numbers 13](#)), one of whom was Joshua himself ([13:8](#); [14:6](#), [30](#), [38](#); etc.). However, this time, the decision to send spies was likely Joshua’s. He undoubtedly wanted to know more about Jericho’s fortifications and its inhabitants. Cities in the ancient world were situated in locations that favored three things: defensibility, access to water, and access to trade routes. Jericho was no exception.

The city of Jericho mentioned in the Old Testament was located northwest of the Dead Sea and about five miles west of the Jordan River. Freshwater springs are in the region, causing the city to experience fertility in the wilderness, leading to the city’s nickname, “the City of Palms” ([Deuteronomy 34:3](#); [2 Chronicles 28:15](#)). Archeology reveals that there is more than one location for Jericho as the city was rebuilt from time to time (compare [Joshua 2:1](#); [6:26](#); [8:2](#); [Judges 3:13](#); [2 Kings 2:4](#)). The

complex rebuilt by Herod is mentioned in the New Testament (examples: [Mark 10:46](#); [Luke 19:1](#)). The modern city of Jericho includes more than one of the ancient sites.

The Israelite spies entered Jericho and went to the house of a woman named Rahab. The text refers to her as a “prostitute” ([Joshua 2:1](#)). The underlying Hebrew word has a broad range of meanings, including “prostitute” or “innkeeper.” Centuries later, the writers of the New Testament, who wrote in ancient Greek, identified her as a prostitute ([Hebrews 11:31](#); [James 2:25](#)). Regardless of her profession, she was an independent woman with financial means whose house may have been similar to a modern-day hostel or motel.

As a bit of speculation, the spies may have gone to Rahab’s place because (1) strangers going to her home would not be unusual, (2) the location of her home on the wall could facilitate an emergency escape, and/or (3) the Lord led them there because she was an astute individual who was developing a faith in the God of Israel.

But the spies *were* noticed. During the ensuing investigation, Rahab lied to the king and misdirected the pursuers ([Joshua 2:2–7](#)). Our lesson text begins with Rahab’s revealing of her motives for hiding the Israelite spies.

I. The Lord’s Reputation ([Joshua 2:8–13](#))

A. Feeling Fearful (vv. [8–9](#))

8. Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof

The rooftops of ancient houses were typically flat, in contrast to the multi-pitched roofs of many modern structures. Ancient rooftops often served multiple functions, including spaces for household members to live, work, or store items. The rooftop was the most private and secluded part of an ancient house (examples: [1 Samuel 9:25](#); [2 Samuel 11:2](#)), making it suitable for hiding the two Israelite spies.

9. and said to them, “I know that the LORD has given you this land 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.

The pronoun *them* refers to the two spies sent out by Joshua. Rahab could easily expose the spies’ presence to the authorities of Jericho. Instead, she hides them on her rooftop and directs the authorities elsewhere (see [Lesson Context](#)). What Rahab says now in the verse before us reveals the motive for her act of treason against the king.

First, she realizes that *the Lord*, the God of Israel, has *given* the *land* of Canaan—the land on which Jericho sits—to the Israelites. The title *LORD* (with a large capital letter and three small capital letters) reflects God’s identity, often transliterated as “Yahweh,” meaning “I who I am” or “I will be what I will be” (see [Exodus 3:13–14](#)). It conveys God’s reliability to be himself, not fickle or changing like people or pagan gods (compare [James 1:17](#)). Rahab could instead use the word *Elohim*, a designation used for both pagan gods and the true God (example: [Leviticus 19:4](#)), but the text doesn’t indicate that she does.

Events that result in *great fear* and hand-wringing among *all who live in this country* of Canaan have had a further effect on Rahab personally: the events draw forth her recognition of who is behind it all. The nature of those events is described in our next verse.

What Do You Think?

Can you recall a time when you sensed God at work in a situation before others did?

Digging Deeper

How did your awareness of God's work affect your actions, choices, or relationships in that moment?

Courage in Unexpected Places

He was not someone people would expect to become a hero. In 2013, seventy-one-year-old William Ayotte was watching television in his home in Manitoba, Canada. Suddenly, he heard a woman's screams outside. Looking out his window, he saw a large bear grasping his neighbor, waving her in the air.

Ayotte grabbed a nearby shovel, ran to the bear, and slammed the shovel into the bear's eye. That was enough to startle the bear into letting go of the woman—and turning to attack Ayotte. Other neighbors joined the struggle, using gunshots and trucks to scare away the bear before worse injuries occurred. Ayotte did not act alone, but had he not responded first, the woman may have been killed. An elderly man with a shovel was not necessarily the type of person expected to lead the charge against an aggressive bear.

Exceptional courage sometimes can be found among the people we would least expect to see it. Rahab demonstrated remarkable courage, protecting the Israelite spies from the authorities. In what ways is God calling you to show exceptional courage that is countercultural?

—JW

B. Melting Hearts (vv. 10–11)

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.

Rahab reveals the basis of the people's anxiety. The first of two victories she mentions, the parting of *the water of the Red Sea*, was a key feature of the escape from enslavement in *Egypt*. In the Israelites' moment of need, the Lord *dried up* the water, allowing the Israelites to cross on dry land ([Exodus 13:17–14:31](#)).

The second victory occurred in the region *east of the Jordan River*, where Kings *Sihon* and *Og* led the *Amorites* in an attack against the Israelites. However, through the power of the Lord, the Amorite forces were defeated and *completely destroyed* ([Numbers 21:21–35](#); [Deuteronomy 2:31–3:11](#)).

Not to be overlooked is that these two events occur about forty years apart! Rahab's knowledge of the defeat of the kings is easy to understand, having recently happened. But where does her knowl-

edge of the decades-past parting of the Red Sea come from? Some who live in Canaan and Jericho may remember having heard of that miracle when they were much younger. In any case, Rahab recalls something about God's power that the Israelites themselves often seem to forget (compare [Numbers 14:11](#)).

What Do You Think?

What accounts of God's power—either from Scripture or your own experience—have deepened your understanding of who he is?

Digging Deeper

How will you share these stories with others to build their faith?

11a. “When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you,

At this point, the Israelites have not yet crossed the Jordan River to enter the land of Canaan. To outside observers, it appears they have been stalled for some forty years on the other side of that river (see [Numbers 14:20–25, 34](#)). But news of the recent defeat of Kings Sihon and Og has alarmed the Canaanites, shaking them from their complacency; this is a fulfillment of the prophecy in [Deuteronomy 2:24–25](#).

As a result of having *heard* of these events, their *hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed*. This melting of hearts and disappearance of courage will only intensify as events progress ([Joshua 5:1; 7:5; 14:8](#)). The Canaanites’ lack of courage is not to be mirrored by the Israelites—quite the opposite. The courage leaders exhibit is contagious, and Joshua is personally challenged several times to act courageously in his role as a leader ([Deuteronomy 31:4–8, 23; Joshua 1:6–7, 9, 18](#)). As the military campaign progresses, he will model courage for the people to emulate ([10:25](#)).

11b. “for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

Rahab again refers to *the Lord* by his unique designation (see commentary on [Joshua 2:9](#), above). Scripture does not explicitly state that she completely abandons her loyalty to the pagan gods of the Canaanites. However, she does acknowledge to the spies that their *God* rules both *heaven above* and the *earth below*. This confession reveals her awareness of his supremacy and power over all creation (see [Deuteronomy 4:39](#)). Any lesser “god” must be subservient to him (compare [Exodus 15:11; 18:11; Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalms 135:5; 136:2](#)).

Any appeal for deliverance she might make to a pagan deity would be a failure to take into account the absolute authority of the Lord God. Rahab’s confession of the Lord’s authority is undoubtedly unexpected, as it opposes the norms of the inhabitants of Jericho and Canaan. Centuries later, another woman of Canaanite heritage will demonstrate persistent and surprising faith, becoming an example for others ([Matthew 15:21–28](#)).

What Do You Think?

What “lesser gods” (idols, distractions, or misplaced priorities) tend to compete with your focus on God’s authority?

Digging Deeper

What practices or habits help you cultivate a sense of awe in the Lord as the true God of heaven and earth?

Aid from Unexpected Allies

In the 1990s, my husband and I served as missionaries in the former Soviet Union. Much of our work relied on the assistance of local translators, and we often collaborated with unbelievers. My husband worked with one such translator, Igor. This translator helped my husband answer people's questions about faith, God, and the Bible. Since the same questions came up repeatedly, Igor started anticipating and answering the questions himself. Although he did not consider himself a follower of Jesus, he became skilled at explaining the significance of faith in Christ to others.

Igor and many other translators did not begin working with missionaries out of love for Jesus or a passion for the church. Most viewed the work as an opportunity to earn money and gain career experience. However, many became unexpected allies over time as they learned the gospel and committed to following Christ.

Rahab was also an unexpected ally. She was not a Hebrew but a citizen of a hostile people. However, she acknowledged the Lord God and protected the Israelite spies. This aided them in taking possession of the land. Are you attentive to “unexpected allies” who God may place in your life? Are you alert to opportunities to be such an ally?

—LMW

C. Swearing Kindness (vv. 12–13)

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

Having acknowledged the supremacy of *the Lord*, Rahab negotiates with the spies in terms of a *quid pro quo* (“something for something else”). The statements about a mutual showing of *kindness* elegantly understate a brutal reality: lives are at stake! The two spies recognize this instantly in their reply, “Our lives for your lives” ([Joshua 2:14](#)).

Rahab has already demonstrated the type of kindness she has in mind by misdirecting the search party, having done so at significant personal risk (see [Lesson Context](#)). In modern terms, we might say that the Israelites “owe her” a guarantee of personal safety in return. But she is Visual for asking for more than that. She wants the guarantee to extend also to her *family*.

The Conquest of Canaan

-  Failed Attempt to Enter Canaan
 -  Desert Wandering
 -  Conquest of Canaan
- Some routes and locations are estimates.



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Lessons 3,4

The *sure sign* she seeks is a physical item representing her request. We might think of it in terms of collateral of some sort (compare [Genesis 38:15–18](#)). The text does not reveal the nature of that sign. Later verses state that a cord of scarlet thread hung from her window as a signal to the Israelites regarding the location of her household ([Joshua 2:18](#)). The word translated *sign* is occasionally connected with covenants in the Old Testament (examples: [Genesis 9:12, 17; 17:11](#)). If the idea is more along the lines of “covenant,” the reference may be to the oath that the spies take in [Joshua 2:17](#).

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.”

Rahab’s request for safety extends well beyond that of her own life. We do not know whether her family members have affirmed the supremacy of the Lord God as she has. Eventually, she will have to reveal to her family the agreement she made to protect the Israelite spies. On the one hand, Rahab is guilty of the high crime of treason. On the other hand, that very act results in the saving of several family members ([Joshua 6:22–23](#)). It comes down to the issue of conflicting loyalties. When loyalties conflict, courage and clear thinking are called for.

The spies outline three conditions Rahab must meet for her request to be granted. These are listed in [Joshua 2:14, 17–19](#), not in today’s printed text.

II. The Lord’s Victory ([Joshua 6:16–17](#))

After the rooftop conversation, Rahab helps the spies escape through a window in her house that is connected to the city wall ([Joshua 2:15](#)). After three days in hiding, the spies return to the Israelite camp and share with Joshua the findings of their reconnaissance mission ([2:23–24](#)).

The crossing of the Jordan River and its effects come next ([Joshua 3:1–5:1](#); see [Lesson 2](#)). Passover is observed ([5:2–10](#)), and the Israelites begin living off the produce of the land ([5:11–12](#)).

As the Israelites near Jericho, the Lord instructs the Israelite fighting men to march around the city once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh day ([Joshua 5:13–6:7](#)). Our lesson text resumes on the seventh of those seven circuits.

A. The Final Lap (v. 16)

16. The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, “Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!”

The Israelites’ actions reflect the directives of [Joshua 6:6–9](#). Per those instructions, seven *priests* carrying trumpets went ahead of the ark of the covenant. The ancient Israelites have two kinds of trumpets. The most common ones are made from rams’ horns. Mention of this kind of trumpet occurs about seventy times in the Old Testament, and that is what is in view here. Another kind of trumpet is made from silver (example: [Numbers 10:2](#)).

The functions of these two kinds of trumpets can overlap, as both are used to signal impending

action. In this verse, the ram's horn conveys military signals during battle. An example of the other kind of trumpet also being used in this manner can be found in [Numbers 31:6](#).

On this, the *seventh* circuit on the seventh day, Joshua issues a command different from those of the other days. At first, the Israelites were to keep silent while the horns blew. But at Joshua's command, the army was to *shout*, the wall would collapse, and the army would rush in ([Joshua 6:5, 10](#)). Joshua speaks confidently, knowing that *the Lord* will provide victory by giving *the city* to the Israelites.

What Do You Think?

When has God asked you to act in faith before you saw the results?

Digging Deeper

What is God calling you to do right now that requires bold, obedient faith—your version of the command “Shout!”?

B. The Results (v. 17)

17a. “The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD.

The Hebrew term translated *devoted* appears dozens of times in the Old Testament. More than one-third of those are found in the book of Joshua (here and in [Joshua 6:18](#) [twice]; [7:1](#) [twice], [11–13](#) [four times], [15](#); [22:20](#)). The word refers to the complete destruction of material wealth, cities, and even people within the context of conquest. The verb form of the word appears in [Joshua 2:10](#), where it is translated as “completely destroyed” (see above). By setting certain things aside for destruction, those things are dedicated *to the Lord*.

This word expresses a sacred process intended to establish the holiness God desired for both the land and the people (compare [Leviticus 27:28–29](#); [Joshua 6:18–19](#)). The ancient inhabitants of the land had defiled it through idolatry, violence, and immorality. As the Israelites entered the land, God wanted them—and the land—to be undefiled by sin ([Leviticus 18:3, 24–30](#)). Therefore, God gave the command for destruction to a particular people in a specific time and context. The purpose of this destruction was to remove any and all influence that could lead the Israelites into sin and idolatry.

17b. “Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent.”

Joshua intends to honor the agreement his spies made with Rahab—and he does. While Jericho is destroyed ([Joshua 6:21, 24](#)), *Rahab* and *all who are with her in her house* are spared ([6:25](#)). Through the blessing and hospitality shown to this Canaanite woman and her family, we see an early example of the fulfillment that God promised the nations through the seed of Abraham (see [Genesis 12:2–3](#)).

Conclusion

A. Faith Prompts the Unexpected

Rahab's faith and bravery serve as an example for the people of God yet today. The writer of Hebrews cites her faith for receiving and protecting the spies ([Hebrews 11:31](#)). Additionally, James

extols Rahab's actions, calling her "righteous" ([James 2:25](#)). The Gospel of Matthew mentions her as an ancestor of King David and, ultimately, of Jesus the Messiah ([Matthew 1:5–6, 16](#)).

When we examine the account of Rahab, the Israelite spies, and the destruction of Jericho, we may find our expectations turned upside down. We don't expect a woman in Jericho to offer hospitality to Israelite spies. Nor do we anticipate that a strategy involving marching, shouting, and blowing horns could destroy a city.

But God often works in unexpected ways. The next time he unexpectedly taps you on the shoulder, how will you react—by looking to your weaknesses or to his strength?

What Do You Think?

In what ways will you be more attentive to recognizing and responding to God's unexpected work?

Digging Deeper

What steps can you take this week to trust God's direction over your own?

B. Prayer

Lord God, you fulfill your will through unexpected people and in ways that confound our expectations. Empower us through your Spirit to expect your unexpected ways so we can be better conduits of your grace and mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Work with God in his unexpected ways.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Start the class by writing the following heading on the board:

Important lessons to share about God ...

Ask participants to give responses to the heading. Write each response on the board. After gathering responses, ask each participant to choose the two responses they consider most important from the list. Make tally marks next to each response chosen. Discuss the conclusions as a whole class.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "What I Know, How I Learned" exercise from the activity page,

which you can download. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before sharing responses with a partner.

Transition into Bible study by saying, “We have all learned about God through various sources. Today, we will study a woman who learned about God’s power and strength. Let’s explore how she responded to her knowledge of God in a way that was different from her neighbors.”

Into the Word

Divide learners into pairs. Distribute pens and handouts (you prepare) with the following questions:

1. *Where did Rahab meet with the spies to ask for a significant favor?*
2. *What words describe the emotions or feelings of the Canaanites when they heard of the Israelites’ advances?*
3. *What acts of God had the inhabitants of the land heard about prior to the spies’ arrival?*
4. *How were God’s power and presence evident to the inhabitants of Jericho?*
5. *What favor did Rahab request of the spies?*
6. *What actions did the priests take prior to Joshua’s speech to the people?*
7. *What instructions did Joshua give the Israelites regarding the seventh circuit around the city on the seventh day?*

Invite pairs to read [Joshua 2:8–13](#) and [6:16–17](#) and write responses to the questions on the hand-out. After calling time, reconvene participants and discuss conclusions as a whole class.

Option. Direct pairs to reread the Scripture text and brainstorm three more questions that help them understand what Rahab and the people of Jericho knew about God. Invite pairs to write these questions on the handouts. Collect the handouts with the new questions and redistribute them to new pairs for study and response.

Ask the following question for whole-class discussion: “How would you describe the relationship between Rahab’s knowledge of God, her confession of God’s majesty, and her acts of hospitality toward the spies?”

Into Life

Remind learners that the account of Rahab illustrates how the Lord can use unexpected people to accomplish his will. Say, “Let’s take a moment to reflect on the people we might view as unexpected candidates to accomplish God’s will.” Invite participants to share with their previous partner about a time when God used an unexpected person to accomplish his will in their lives.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Unexpected in God’s Great Hands” exercise from the activity page. Encourage learners to complete the activity as a take-home during the upcoming week. To encourage completion, state that you will allow time at the beginning of next week’s class for learners to share responses.

Conclude class with a prayer, asking the Lord to inspire class members to be “unexpected people” who serve God and accomplish his will in the lives of others.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(September 27—Rahab Welcomes Spies\)](#)
