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PRETTY WOMAN
Joshua 2

Laurie and I boarded the plane for our flight home from our vacation. She had the window seat and I was the fortunate one, assigned to the middle seat of three. When we got situated the aisle seat next to me was empty. I had this brief flare of hope that I would be granted that most beautiful blessing of having the seat next to me remain empty. But I saw people still boarding the plane and knew it was not to be. I picked him out as soon as he began coming down the aisle. I knew he was going to be the person who would sit next to me. He was the guy who paid for one seat, but it was obvious he would not fit in one seat. Sure enough Mr. Seat And A Half plopped down in the seat next to me. This guy should have been accompanied by one of those trucks that has a revolving light and a sign that says, "Wide Load." He was just a big man. That was all right though because the airline seats are so spacious...not. I was already crammed into a tiny, cramped, uncomfortable space. I have personally concluded that if waterboarding is considered cruel and unusual punishment then surely jamming a living, breathing human being into a space that small for more than 5 hours should be too. It was enough to make me willing to tell them everything I know. Now added to the torture my tiny space just got reduced by a good 40% by the presence of Passenger Seat And A Half next to me.

Halfway through the flight my all too close neighbor got up to visit the little room back by the galley. While he was gone I mentioned to Laurie how uncomfortable it was to have this guy squeezing me into such a small space. She said, "Well, you could put the armrest up." I said, "What a great idea! Why didn't I think of that? That way he can more easily spread even more into my territory." She started laughing. She laughed hard. She began laughing so hard she was gasping for breath and she just kept on laughing. I made a couple of other sort of sarcastic comments and every one was met with a renewed bout of laughter. Have you ever been around someone who is laughing that hard and that long? Do you know how it affects you? It is contagious. I couldn't help it. I started laughing too. Pretty soon both of us were laughing almost uncontrollably and couldn't stop. People around us on the plane were looking at us and wondering what in the world was so funny, wishing they could join in the fun. We were clearly having more fun than anyone else on the aircraft. When my friend Wide Load returned we were still laughing a little, but just his arrival sparked a new round of laughing. The cool thing about that was that Laurie's laughter actually changed the situation. An unpleasant thing

actually became a funny thing and made it much more bearable. I think it's pretty cool that Laurie actually kind of redeemed an unpleasant thing.

Today we are going to look at an historical incident that is recorded in Joshua 2, and we will see that in fact that there is hope of redemption for everything and everyone, and that's great news. If you have ever felt there is no hope, for you, for some situation, or for some person, you need to see what happens in the passage we're going to look at today.

THE INCIDENT

Joshua Needed Intel

We saw last week that Israel is on the border of Canaan having been promised by God that he would give them that land as their home. God has instructed them to now mount a military campaign to defeat and drive out the people living in Canaan. The first obstacle they faced was Jericho, a city a few miles west of the Jordan River. Jericho had an elaborate defense system, consisting of a tall stone retaining wall, perhaps 12 feet high with a mud brick wall atop that, then a high berm and another mud brick wall on top of that. The entire construction was likely around 40 feet high. There was a fresh water spring inside the city that would supply all the water the inhabitants needed.

If they were to take over the land Israel had to knock out Jericho. If they simply bypassed it the city would be a constant threat to them. But how do you take down a walled fortress? Air power wasn't going to do the trick because the Israeli Air Force at that point probably consisted of some homing pigeons. A constant artillery barrage would not accomplish the task because they didn't have any artillery. So that left them with only one option. They had to lay siege to Jericho. Or so it seemed.

Unfortunately a long siege was less than ideal for Joshua. The history of the Hebrew people since they escaped Egypt was that their default response to any difficult situation was, "you brought us here to die." If they had to sustain a long siege the people of Israel might well get fed up and want to quit. Furthermore a long siege opened them to attack from other groups. Seeing Israel's intent to conquer the land it was highly likely that some Canaanite group or combination of groups might come in aid of Jericho and attack the Israelis from the rear. The last thing Joshua wanted in their first sortie was to end up with a two front battle. He needed a plan that would make for a quick win.

The obvious first step in coming up with such a plan was to gather intelligence on the enemy. So Joshua instructed Mossad to get him their two best operators who could blend in among the people of the region. These two scouted some of the countryside first. They wanted to make sure there were no concentrations of forces gathering anywhere close by that might launch a surprise attack on Israel while it was besieging Jericho. Then they went into Jericho itself. They had several goals. They wanted to see how well equipped the city was to withstand a siege and they wanted to map out the defenses. But they especially tried to find any weaknesses that Israel might exploit, find out if there was any quick way to get inside the city without a long siege. And of course they wanted to gauge the morale of the people. If the people of Jericho were resolute and steeling themselves for a siege it could make for a protracted battle, something Joshua did not want.

The spies ended up in a brothel owned by a prostitute named Rahab. There was likely a good rationale for choosing to stay there. Nevertheless it must have been an interesting moment when the spies turned in their expense report and it included the stay in a brothel. "Uh, could you guys explain why you went to a brothel? Wait, no, don't explain it, I guess I already know. But that's not an allowable expense." But what else were they going to do? There was no Holiday Inn Express for the spies to get a good night's sleep in. They didn't know anyone in the city so they couldn't stay with friends or relatives. The last thing they wanted to do was sleep out in the open and attract attention to themselves as strangers who didn't belong there. So, the brothel was a fairly obvious place. Neighbors were accustomed to seeing men come and go from that establishment, so the two spies could easily blend in. At least they thought they could. As it turned out they didn't blend in as well as they thought they could.

The Operatives Were Saved By Rahab

A few years ago I read an article that pointed out Hollywood has long had an odd fascination with prostitutes. An almost stock character in movies is the good hearted prostitute, the most obvious of them being the character played by Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. It turns out that Rahab could have been the model for such women, for she indeed was a good hearted prostitute.

Unfortunately Mossad was in its infancy in those days and they evidently weren't as good at espionage tradecraft as they needed to be. Their cover was blown quickly. Verse 2 tells us that night a report went to the king of Jericho telling him about the two spies so he sent the JBI (Jericho Bureau of Investigation) to Rahab's house to arrest the two Mossad agents.

We don't know how the locals identified them. Possibly the agents went in to a restaurant and when the waitress asked for their order they said, "Anything but manna." Or maybe they tried to pay for the meal with an Israeli Express credit card. My guess is that the king of Jericho had spies of his own watching the Israeli camp. They might well have followed the boys from Mossad all the way into town so they were burned before they even got there. That would fit with the wording of verse 2 where the king was told, "Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land."

The spies are in a world of hurt. They hear the dreaded knock on the door by the secret police in the middle of the night. They are trapped in Rahab's house when the JBI arrive. They have no way out. They can't sneak out and they sure can't fight their way out of the city. To their amazement and relief Rahab covers for them without even being asked. Somehow she knew the JBI were coming. Apparently she had sources of her own. She had bundles of flax drying on her roof, a common practice of the day. She took the Mossad team up to the roof and covered them with the flax. Then she put on an act for the JBI when they showed up. She told them that yes, those sneaky Mossad guys had been to her house, but they had left, headed out of the city just before dusk when the gates of the town were closed for the night. Who knows where they were going next, probably in the direction of their camp.

I think Rahab was a terrific actress. She totally sells the story to the JBI. They didn't even bother to search the house. Personally I think Rahab was likely an awfully attractive woman. The JBI boys probably wanted to believe whatever she told them because they wanted to get on her good side. So they just left in pursuit of the phantom spies.

The Operators Returned The Favor

Rahab then explained to the spies the reason why she protected them. She knew how this thing was going to turn out. Verse 9 tells all we need to know. She said, "I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us." Everyone in town was "melting in fear." She went on in verse 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." She knew they had God on their side. Israel's God was not just some phony idol, not some supposed god of some aspect of creation. Rahab knew he was the Ruler of all. Having God on their side meant the outcome of the coming battle was a done deal. The most remarkable thing about Rahab's report was her faith. She was a pagan born and

raised, yet she believed that Yahweh, the God of Israel was the true God. She believed that he actually acted in this world on his people's behalf.

So Rahab now made a deal with the guys from Mossad. I've saved your skins, now you save mine. I will make sure you safely get out of town if you will promise that when your forces attack they will not kill me and my family. The agents agree, telling her to hang a red rope out the window of her home so the Israelis will know where she lives. That red rope that provides the way of rescue for her family is a reminder of the blood of the lamb that protected Israel on the night of the first Passover, and is a picture ultimately of the death of Messiah as they way of rescue for all of the human race. The spies promise to protect all those who are in the house. With that they left, hid out in the hills until the JBI gave up the search for them, then headed back to camp to report to Joshua.

THE IMPLICATIONS

God will use our faith and obedience

Joshua and the agents were acting in faith. The previous generation of Israel had been in exactly the same situation and sent in a special ops team to recon the land. That team went with the mindset of gauging how difficult it would be to conquer Canaan. They were considering whether they ought to attempt it or not. In other words, they thought their mission was to collect some data points for the calculation of whether they should obey God's command or not.

Joshua and his two operators had a totally different approach. They were going to obey God. That was a given. They were going to invade. The only questions they needed answers for were what was the best way to do it and how hard was it going to be. Joshua needed to prepare his troops for whatever they faced so this intelligence was important. But there was never a question about whether they were going to do it.

The spies didn't come back with a report that identified a key weakness that would enable Joshua to develop a brilliant plan of attack. Yet God did use the spies to encourage the people to carry out the campaign against Jericho. What a contrast between their report and that of the majority of the first special ops team that scouted Canaan. That team said in Numbers 13:31, "we can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." Compare that with these two who said in Joshua 2:24, "The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands."

The previous generation of spies gave a report that led to a defeat before the battle even started. Numbers 14:1-3 says, after hearing their report "all the people of the

community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, ‘If only we had died in Egypt or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?’” They concluded in verse 4, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

That could have happened again. But this time there’s not a hint of that. No one is saying, “Let’s go back to the desert.” No one is circulating a petition to recall Joshua. No one is weeping. They are like the football players fired up in the locker room, head butting lockers, pounding each other’s shoulder pads and yelling, “We must protect this house!” They’re fired up and ready to go. In short, God used these two to encourage Israel to obey God this time and as a result the nation’s course in history was forever changed.

Hebrews 11:2 says faith “is what the ancients were commended for.” Verse 6 says “without faith it is impossible to please God.” It all starts with faith. Then the author goes on to detail how Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses’ parents, Moses himself, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, all had faith and acted on that faith. The message is that if we act on faith and obey God will use us. He may not use us in the way we expect or choose just like he did not use the spies to come up with a plan for attacking Jericho. But he used them nonetheless for a significant purpose, and so he will use us.

Perhaps the most famous missionary to Africa was David Livingstone. Oddly, he could be considered a failure, and easily could have seen his life that way. He was a lousy leader. Though he did great things exploring Africa, his biggest expedition was a failure and as a missionary he had a grand total of one convert. That’s a pretty sad summation. Except that because of him hordes of missionaries went to central Africa after his death, he had an influence on ending slave trade in the British empire, a number of missionary societies were created because of him, and his one convert led literally thousands of other Africans to faith in Christ.

Livingstone was a flawed human being who could be difficult. In many ways he seemed to fail. But he acted in faith. He obeyed God, and God used him to change the world. This is such a huge encouragement for us. It is a principle that comes into play in raising children. It may not go as you thought, but if you put your faith in God and obey him day in and day out God will use your efforts.

Difficult times likely will come in your life. You will probably pray and have some idea of how God will answer and resolve your problems. He may not. In fact he

likely won't do what you expect. But if you continue to trust him even in the bleakest times, if you obey him he will use you in some way. You may not see it, but he will use you. Same is true of loving your neighbors, co-workers, friends and family. You may not accomplish what you would like, but God will use your faithfulness in some way. **Trusting God and obeying him will never be wasted. God will always use our obedience!**

God works his sovereign plan in our lives

This is where it gets really interesting. The spies likely thought their intel would play a key role in developing the plan for conquering Jericho. They were wrong. God had a plan that no human intel would impact one way or the other. He was going to knock down Jericho's walls without human assistance.

I suspect after the battle the two spies wondered what the point of all that was. If God was going to do what he did to Jericho what was the point of them putting their lives at risk to do that recon of the city? Sometimes the powers that be make us do things that seem pointless. On our recent vacation trip Laurie and I had to go through security at the airport as we were preparing to take a 40 minute interisland flight. We went through the scanner then a TSA agent said, "I need to check your knee." I was wearing shorts! I said, "Excuse me?" He repeated, "I need to check your right knee." So he reached down and felt my right knee. What was he checking for in my knee? Did he think I had a gun or some explosives hidden in my knee? No wait, I know. The scanner is a lot better than I thought. They had spotted an injury to a ligament in my knee and he was confirming that I might need surgery. No, he just checked my knee and said, "Okay, you can go." What was the point of that exercise? Is flying now safer because the TSA knows I don't have any weapons stashed away inside my knee? Is there really some TSA protocol for checking people's knees? What a total waste of time.

So was the Mossad mission in that category? Since God wasn't going to use their intel for the invasion plan was it a waste of time? Not at all. God used those spies in a hugely significant way. What did he do with them? He had them contact Rahab the prostitute and make sure that she would be saved. In fact, that now appears to be the real point of their mission. You can be quite sure that it would never have occurred to them that saving Rahab was the most important thing they did, but it was. I believe it was what God had planned for them all along!

Why was saving Rahab important? Rahab has had a significant part in God's revelation. Both Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 hold up Rahab as an example of faith for us. More than 3000 years after she lived God is using Rahab, of all people,

to teach us about faith. Do you think those spies had any idea that would happen? I feel pretty safe in saying such a thing would never have occurred to them.

There's even more. In Matthew 1 the apostle Matthew recounted the genealogy that produced Jesus Christ. Verse 5 identifies as one of his ancestors "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab." Some say the Rahab mentioned by Matthew was not the Rahab of Jericho. However, there is a pretty strong case that it is the same woman. That being the case this tells us something astounding. Though they had no idea this is what they were doing these spies saw to it that they were in fact rescuing a woman who would play a direct role in ultimately producing the Messiah who would save the world.

Do you see the amazing wisdom of God? Joshua and the spies thought they were doing one thing, when in God's plan they were actually accomplishing something they could never have imagined, something that wouldn't be known for many hundreds of years. You can see this in the history of ancient Israel. The classic example is in the life of Joseph. His 11 brothers were jealous of him. I think he probably was unwise in maybe being a little too vocal about his special position until they got sick of him. So they decided to get rid of him. First they were going to kill him, but they were persuaded that was going too far. So they sold him to slave traders. They thought they would never hear from him again. Poor Joseph ends up in Egypt as a slave and eventually gets unfairly thrown into prison. Yet God used the bad attitudes and evil choices of Joseph's brothers to get him right where he wanted him. As a result of all that happened to him he was in just the right spot to become the second most powerful man in Egypt. He was in just the right spot to organize an effort to prepare that nation for an upcoming disaster that no one else saw coming. That disaster was a terrible famine that struck the entire region so that Joseph's own family ran out of food. Joseph was in the one spot he could have been in to save his own family.

Daniel 2:20-22 says, "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him." Isaiah 46:9-10 says, "I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning; from ancient times what is to come. I say: My purpose will stand and I will do all that I please." Hundreds, even thousands, of years before events God already has a plan that he is carrying out. People typically have no idea what he is doing and can only see it in retrospect.

This is enormously encouraging for us. Whatever you are doing that you think might be great, important and lasting, in fact we don't really know. What that means is that we can just focus on being faithful to God and trusting that somehow he is weaving it into his eternal, sovereign plan and will somehow use it, probably in some way we would never imagine.

I know you'll be shocked at this, but I am going to use a football analogy. I'm an average football fan. I mostly like to see great offensive plays. I usually don't enjoy a game that ends 10-7. I live those 45-42 games, and I love to see them throw the football. I get frustrated when a team I like keeps running the ball into the middle of the line for uninteresting 2 or 3 yard gains over and over. They give the ball to a guy and he disappears into a horde of other guys and then the play stops. Not very exciting. Sometimes I've seen teams do that over and over. I hate the expression, "we have to establish the run." However, it is not uncommon to see a team do that to the distraction of its fans, yet somehow win the game in the end. The reason is the coach isn't trying to win the game in the first or second quarter. He's aiming to win it in the 4th quarter. The repeated pounding of those big offensive lineman and a fullback blocking and ultimately the blows delivered by a big running back eventually wear a defense out. It grinds them down so that in the last quarter they're exhausted and give way and the other team drives to win the game because they don't have the strength left to stop them. The coach's play calling, which seemed inexplicable early on, wasn't aimed at just success early on. It was aimed at something much later in the game.

That's a little how God works in our lives. What God has happen in our lives may be aimed at something we may never see. It may have a bigger goal than we could ever imagine. So what this means for you and me is each day if we will just focus on being faithful to do what God wants us to do and be what he wants us to be, somehow God will make something amazing out of that, whether we see it or not. Bill Farrington was a classic case of this. He had a friend named Ivar who was a man in our church. Ivar didn't preach at people, but he lived out his faith and he wasn't bashful about it. But Ivar's life seemingly was cut short, he just dropped dead one day in his mid 40's. His life and his sudden death were the triggers that ultimately caused Bill to put his faith in Jesus Christ. Here's the thing: Ivar never knew it. He had no idea what impact he had on Bill. We simply don't know what God will do with us if we will just be faithful to him. One act of grace, one act of kindness, one example of unconditional love, one simple statement of faith that you are not even especially cognizant of, may be what God uses to impact someone, maybe even years later, and you may never know it. And that person could conceivably go on to impact many others that you will never know about. So

trust God day in and day out. I feel pretty safe in saying that TSA agent who checked my knee can check people's knees every day for the next 50 years and it will never make a bit of difference. But if we will trust God and obey him each and every day, there is no limit to what God may end up using us to accomplish in his sovereign power.

God can redeem anyone or anything

Think about Rahab. Part of the reason I think Rahab must have been a strikingly lovely woman is that one would think she would not exactly be considered a great catch for a Jewish man. She was Gentile from a pagan background, and to make matters worse she had been a prostitute. Yet she would go on to marry a man in a prominent Israeli family. I think she was probably pretty special.

There are people who try to soften her image by saying that she actually wasn't a prostitute, but just an innkeeper. But both Hebrews and James refer to her as a prostitute, using the word *porne*, a word that can only mean a woman of ill repute. It is likely that in her culture that was a more respectable career choice than it is today, but from a biblical perspective it is still what it is. She sold her body to men.

If you had the opportunity to survey the people of Canaan looking for likely converts to the one true God, if you had looked for people who would be good candidates to be a believer of God, and even become an ancestor of the Messiah, how high on your list do you think Rahab would have ranked? I don't think any of us would have had her as a first round draft pick for the line of Messiah.

Yet she was not beyond either the reach or the grace of God. The very character of God is Savior, Redeemer. There is no one who is beyond his reach. There is not a single situation that you or I will ever encounter that his grace cannot take and make into something good. There is hope for every person, every situation we encounter because God has the power to redeem.

Vince Antonucci's book, *Renegade*, (p. 13) begins with these words, "He swaggered in wearing both a scowl and bad intentions." The man he was referring to is named Warren. He's a big man, 6 feet 2 inches, 280 pounds, he has a shaved head and his body is covered with tattoos. He plays an evil fire breathing clown in a horror show in Las Vegas and moonlights as a freak show wrestler. He was a hard core atheist who hated the very idea of God and anyone who believes there is a God. He had learned that someone, in this case Antonucci, was starting a new church in the heart of Vegas. That made him mad, so he decided to do something about it. He figured he would just show up scowling at the church and that would

be enough to frighten off some people, but was disappointed when he got no reactions. However, he sat down and waited for the service to start. He planned to stand up in the middle of the service and start shouting obscenities at the pastor and maybe throw a chair or two. He was surprised though, that he kind of enjoyed the music that came first. The whole experience wasn't what he expected, and he got so caught up in what the pastor was saying that he forgot to launch his attack. He decided to come back the next Sunday and try again, only once again he failed. He began going every week. After a while he began going to all three services on Sunday morning, which were identical. By that time Vince had met him so he said, "Dude, you've got to be smart enough to notice that all the services are the same. Why do you come to them all?" He replied, "I know, I just, I guess I just can't get enough of Jesus." A couple of months later Warren broke down sobbing as he was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. A year later he was still going to every service only he came two hours early to help set up. He has little money but finds ways to give money to people in need. When his birthday came he told his friends he didn't want presents. What he wanted was for them to come to church with him. All of his friends are atheists or Satanists who work in horror or freak shows. But 34 of them showed up. No one would have thought there was hope for Warren. But God can redeem anyone, as Rahab showed. He can still redeem today, and Warren is evidence of that truth.

Do you ever feel like you are hopeless? Do you ever feel like God can't help you or wouldn't want to help you? Do you ever feel like you fail so continually to be what God would want that he's likely washing his hands of you? Is there someone in your life that you believe is just beyond hope? Or is there some situation that you have been dealing with that is hopeless? And I don't mean the people in Washington and Sacramento. The great news is that Rahab reminds us nothing and no one is beyond the sovereign power and grace of our God. Today I want to challenge you, whatever that situation is, whoever you are, whoever that person is, tell God that you know that person or situation is not beyond his power and grace. Affirm your faith in him again.