

# *Herem* Sermon

A Sermon by Robert Jackson

Today's sermon is from Joshua 2 – early on in the conquest period.

**Read Joshua 2:1-18** - The sending of the spies into Jericho. Jericho was a strategic and fortified city just west of the Jordan River. There were two fortifying walls: An outer stone wall and an inner clay wall (where outcasts made their dwelling). The Jews were in Canaan claiming God's promise to the Patriarchs that the land of Israel would be theirs. But was it just for them to wipe out a nation?

The truth is that the 400 year subjection of the Jews in Egypt was a *grace period* for the Canaanites to repent, as God explicitly says in Genesis 15:16 (In this passage, the Amorites are used to refer generally to the inhabitants of Canaan.) The Canaanites had the righteous examples of the Patriarchs, Noah and Melchizedek to follow, and God gave them 400 years to repent, but they only got worse. The tribes of Canaan were some of the most amoral the world has ever seen. And so, after all this time, God sent the Israelites in to rid the world of their murderous idolatry.

Rahab hid the spies under linen. This was an act of treason – she would have been executed if they found out she was hiding invading spies. Why did she risk her life? It was because of her remarkable faith! She trusted God that it was the right thing to do – she understood that they were God's messengers - v8. In fact, her declaration of faith in this passage is truly startling – her insight into God's nature and God's plan is similar to that of Joseph.

The scarlet cord reminds us of Passover. It marked her house as safe – not to be destroyed during God's wrath, and this is exactly the same function as the blood of the lambs on the doorframes during the Passover! The spies may well have remembered that preservation technique and sought to imitate it.

**Read Joshua 6:1-5 and 15-23:** After they'd marched around the city for 7 days, they gave a *shout*, and then blew the *trumpet* (actually a ram's horn or *shofar*). In accordance with God's promise, the walls fall. There is a severe rupture layer around the time of Joshua in Jericho – God may well have used a massive earthquake to topple the clay wall outwards into the stone wall, creating a ramp for the Israelites to enter in on.

Why did God want them to go through such an elaborate ritual of marching around the walls? The truth is that God always asks for the *obedience of faith* – actions which are an outworking of faith and which prove our faith genuine (see Hebrews 11:30).

**Reread v17, with footnote:** The Hebrew word here is "*herem*". It can be translated as a *curse*, a *ban*, a *setting apart*, a *devotion* (to God), or a *sacrifice*. When something is *herem*, that's really bad news! It means that God has forcibly taken authority over it, and so it must be destroyed as the ultimate act of devotion – the person, place or thing is devoted to destruction and also under a curse.

Remember Achan's sin (Joshua 7): He took some of the *devoted things* into his tent. He and his family were destroyed. He violated *herem*, and thereby took the curse onto himself, devoting himself to destruction. The curse passes on to any who take *herem* into their possession – to breach the ban has devastating consequences!

The books of Moses teach us that the whole of Canaan was *herem*. The armies of Israel were carrying out the terms of *herem* upon the Canaanites – forcibly asserting God’s authority by destroying them. Harsh words, but it’s true!

So, what did Rahab’s faith really achieve? She escaped *herem*! It’s incredible. She was a part of Jericho, and therefore under the curse. She was just as much a sinner as anyone else, and had been devoted to destruction. But *by faith*, she escaped the terms of the curse!

Her saving faith was sealed by the scarlet thread, which reminds us of the Passover lamb which saved Jews from God’s wrath to Egypt. Our equivalent is Christ’s death. In truth, there are many more parallels with Jericho story and the Gospels.

Two spies sent <i>by God</i> to a foreign land – a country <i>not their own</i> .	Jesus was sent to a world that did not know him.
Everyone wanted the spies dead. They were doing what God wanted them to do – but the authorities want them killed.	Jesus continually persecuted, and then killed by the authorities
One household had <i>faith</i> – Rahab accepted the spies due to her faith in God.	Some followed Jesus and put their faith in God through Him.
They were hidden in a borrowed roof...	Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb...
...Under flax.	...Under flax.
They hid for three days.	Jesus was buried for three days.
They then came back with army.	Jesus will return one day for judgement with legions of angels.
Took the city with a shout...	Jesus will descend with a shout...
...and a trumpet call.	...and a trumpet call (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
The faithful house was spared...	God’s faithful will be spared...
...marked by a scarlet cord	...marked by Jesus’ blood

In other words, Joshua 2 and 6 give us the whole gospel story in miniature. It is one of the most complete foreshadows of the gospel in the Old Testament.

**Malachi 4:5-6:** The final word of the Old Testament is *herem*. The whole world will become *herem* – it will all be destroyed and forcibly returned to God’s authority. This is what the Bible teaches. Scary stuff. But we can draw immense hope from the Jericho story! Like Rahab, we can be spared from God’s wrath through faith. She is our hope! – the living proof that we can escape destruction.

**Matthew 1:5:** A few verses after Malachi’s dark prophecy, we’re reminded of the woman who escaped that very destruction!

**Hebrews 11:31:** She was a sinner – deserved destruction like everyone else. But through faith, God spared her. Here she is in the hall of faith! By faith she was protected, and entered into God’s promise. We are sinners living in a dark world under a curse – but by faith, we too can have hope to be saved and escape the coming wrath.

(The final page of this document contains a handout that can be given after the sermon is delivered – do not distribute it before or during the sermon, since it will spoil the climactic revelation of the parallels between Joshua 6 and the gospel story. Need to have as much dramatic effect as possible!)

# *Herem* Handout

*Herem* refers to God’s judgement. It can be translated “curse”, “ban” or to be “devoted to God”, that is, in the negative sense of something being destroyed in order to represent the ultimate sacrifice to God. Key passages concerning *herem* are: Exodus 34:11-16; Numbers 21:2-3; Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 20:16-18; Joshua 6:21, 8:26, 10:28, 11:11; Psalm 106:34 and Malachi 4:6.

You’ll notice how helpful the NIV is here - it does a great job of translating an untranslatable word, usually by giving a very useful footnote: “The word refers to irrevocable giving over...”

Obviously, the nations of Canaan form the number one example of what was *herem*, as these passages clearly show. God had given them 400 years to repent (Genesis 15:14-16), but they had only gotten worse, so God’s patience had run out. This is a foreshadow of the fate of the whole world, which will one day become *herem* when God’s patience runs out – Malachi 4. For now, we are in a period of grace.

*Herem* has no equivalent in English, but it does have an *exact* equivalent in Greek, namely the word *anathema*. This word can refer to a general curse (it occurs in 1 Corinthians 12:3 - “Jesus be *cursed*”), but also to devoted things: it also occurs in Luke 21:5 – the “votive offerings” or “gifts dedicated to God”. In other words, it an exact equivalent of *herem*. (Bible buffs might be interested to know that in the Septuagint, *anathema* is always used to translate *herem*, and it is never used any other time!)

Just as the story of Jericho is a foretelling of the Gospel story, so the story of Rahab is a key premise for *our* faith that we, too, will escape God’s judgement on the final day (Hebrews 11:31). There are at least 11 direct parallels from the story of Jericho to the Gospel story:

Taking of Jericho	Gospel Story
Spies sent to a foreign land	Jesus sent to a world that did not know him
Everyone wanted the spies dead	Jesus killed by the authorities
One household had faith	Some followed him and became the God’s family
Spies hidden in a borrowed roof...	Jesus buried in a borrowed tomb...
... Under flax	... Under flax
Hid for three days	Buried for three days
Came back with army	Will return one day for judgement with legions of angels
Took the city with a shout...	Will descend with a shout...
... and a trumpet call	... and a trumpet call (1 Thessalonians 4:16)
The one faithful house was spared...	God’s faithful will be spared...
... Marked by a scarlet cord	... marked by His blood

The upshot of all this is clear: Due to her faith, Rahab was spared, even though her city was *herem*. In the same way, by faith, we too can be spared from the coming destruction. Praise God!

Study of these kinds of parallels is called “typology” from the Greek word *tupon*, which means “type” and it occurs in Romans 5:14 (NIV translates with the word “pattern” – another great job by the NIV translators!) Adam was a “pattern” of Christ, according to Paul. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these “types” throughout the Old Testament – Jericho is just one of them!