

The Crimson Cord

(a fictional account of Salmon and Rahab)

by Melanie Dobson

Rahab's Story

A crimson cord dangled over the post on Rahab's bed, and she cursed the sight of it. As one of the king's officers snored in the bed beside her, the weathered cord seemed to mock her. If only she could throw it into the fire or toss it into the wind and watch it blow away.

But even if she destroyed it, she was long past breaking free of the scarlet threads that bound her like spider's silk. The people of Jericho would never forget who she'd become.

She pulled the cord off the post and threw it on the floor. It reminded her of a snake that had slithered its way into her room, like the man who slept beside her this evening—a captain in the king's army—who'd made his way into her bed.

It pleased the king to send men like Jabin to her door to request her presence at the palace. What the king didn't realize was that after his officers delivered their message, they usually partook of her services as well.

She glanced over at Jabin; his mouth drooped open. He thought he was as handsome and powerful as the king, but he was an ugly, lazy man. He held no authority in the city yet visiting her chamber made him feel powerful. Like a flower, he picked and discarded her whenever he pleased.

But later tonight she would be with the king, and in his palace, she pretended to be queen over Jericho. She didn't love the king nor did he love her, but she liked to think he would never discard her, even when the blossom of her youth began to fade.

As Jabin slept, Rahab selected a tunic from her wardrobe—a linen dress dyed the clear blue color of the Jordan River that rested five miles outside their town. Standing in front of her mirror, she piled dark curls on top of her head and secured them with golden pins. Ringlets cascaded down her cheeks and neck, and the gems on her earrings shimmered in the fading light.

Adornment covered her body like the many stones on the city wall. The king knew the scent of her perfume, the glitter of her jewels, the paint on her skin, but he knew nothing of the fears or dreams she harbored inside her walls.

She turned to look out the window, at the green valley and grove of palm trees beyond the wall. If only she could roam like the gazelle in the wilderness. If only she could wash away her paint along with the guilt that stained her soul in the pure waters of the Jordan.

Jabin rustled the covers as he inched himself up on his elbows.

"You are beautiful," he said, and she flinched at his words. Like the king, Jabin knew her body, but he knew nothing else about her.

Rahab tossed his tunic on the bed before refocusing on the mirror. "The king will send someone to look for you if you don't return soon."

"No one will notice if I spend the night." He leaned back against the velvet pillows. "My commander is too busy combing the city for spies."

She glanced back at him. "Spies?"

He nodded, quite pleased that he'd surprised her with his news. "Two Israelites came through the gates this afternoon, pretending to be traders. They think their god can conquer the walls of Jericho."

He laughed, but in the laughter, she heard a strand of fear at the mention of the great Hebrew god. This god had already destroyed two cities east of the Jordan and she had no doubt he could destroy their city as well.

She pointed at Jabin's tunic. "You cannot stay here for the night."

“Why not?” He closed his eyes, his lips curving into a smirk. “After you entertain our king, you will return to me.”

Her stomach rolled at his demand. She was a businesswoman, not a child’s toy. She didn’t have to do his bidding or even that of the king.

In the mirror, she studied the thin lines fanning out from her eyes. Even though she wanted to be strong, wanted to pretend she didn’t have to do what these men said, it simply wasn’t true.

The king first summoned her to the palace when she was fifteen, and after sacrificing to their gods, her father had sent her to do what the king commanded. If she hadn’t gone, she probably would have ended up at the temple like her younger sister who abused her body to please the insatiable appetite of the god her people called El.

Rahab had no devotion to El or his goddess Asherah or to any of their minions. These gods had destroyed her life. Men from across Jericho snuck to her door during the day—and often rushed to it at night—but not one of them would marry her now.

Someone knocked on the door below, and she glanced over at Jabin. His eyes were closed again.

Men knocked frequently on her door but she couldn’t entertain someone else tonight—not with Jabin here and the king waiting for her at the palace.

Sitting down on a stool, she began painting fresh color on her lips and cheeks, but even as she tried to ignore the knocking, it persisted. She glanced down at the scarlet cord. When it wasn’t dangling by her front door, it meant she already had a guest.

Perhaps the visitor wasn’t a guest for her chamber. Perhaps something had happened to her mother or one of her sisters.

She set the brush under her mirror and stared at herself again. Even though she wished her family would visit, they would never knock on her door. A concubine in the king’s house was a respectable occupation and the temple prostitutes were honored, but there was no honor for a harlot living along the city wall.

Rising slowly, she lifted the cord off the floor before ambling down the stairs. Except for the king, she hurried for no man. And lately she didn’t even hurry for the king.

Outside her door were two men, their faces covered with hoods. She lifted the crimson cord. “My business is closed for the night.”

One of the men pushed the hood away from his head, and she gasped. He was much leaner than the Jericho men who usually visited her and younger as well. Probably not five years older than her.

Why were the Hebrew spies knocking on her door?

The cord still in her hands, she waited for the man to consume her with his eyes, before he even touched her skin, but instead of searching her body, he searched her face. “We have not come for business.”

Rahab glanced down the shadows of the alleyway, toward the looming gate of their city, but the gate watchmen weren’t alarmed at the sight of men at her door.

She lowered her voice. “What is it that you need?”

He looked back over his shoulder. “A place to hide.”

Her fingers tapped against the wooden door. She shouldn’t open it to these strangers, not even to save their lives. If the king found out she harbored the enemy, he wouldn’t care about her beauty nor would there be any loyalty for her service to him. The king would demand her head.

But she’d heard stories about this Hebrew god rescuing his people and as she examined the peace on the faces of these strangers, the calm in the midst of danger, she wondered if their god was more powerful than her king. Perhaps even more powerful than Asherah or El.

“Hurry,” she finally said as she waved them into her home.

The men rushed inside.

“I have a—” she started before shame flooded over her. “There is a guest upstairs.”

The men glanced at each other before looking back. “Where can we hide?”

Her footsteps were light on the cold stone as she led them up the stairs and along the velvet curtain on the second floor that hid them from her chamber.

Quietly they moved up another flight of stairs, and when they reached the top, she unlatched a small door. A rancid odor filtered down the staircase from the stacks of flax piled on the rooftop. Once the flax dried, she would make beautiful linen from their fibers, but until then, the stalks were encrusted with mud and mold and all sorts of insects. Not even her perfume could sweeten the stench.

She crept up between the stalks and glanced across at the other rooftops along Jericho's wall. When she saw they were vacant, she motioned the men onto the roof and quickly hid them under the muddy bundles of flax.

Straightening her dress, she walked back down the steps to find Jabin awake in her bed.

He glanced back at the velvet curtain. "I heard a knock."

She tossed the curls that hung around her face, pausing in front of the mirror. "Men are always knocking on my door."

His eyes narrowed as he focused on the scarlet cord still grasped in her hands. "Who was it?"

"One of your men."

His questioning turned to pride as he laughed like a warrior returning from battle, his chariot filled with spoils.

She leaned toward him, her voice a sultry low. "The soldier was looking for you."

Jabin sat up quickly, the laughter gone. "What did you tell him?"

She moved toward the curtain, a smile skimming across her face. "That you left an hour ago to search for the spies."

Jabin finally reached for his tunic and draped the white linen over his neck before belting a leather cord around his waist. "May the gods reward you for keeping my secret."

She cringed. The rewards of their gods were more like a curse.

"I am a keeper of many secrets," she said simply before he left.

She slid the bolt across her door and leaned back against the wood, the cord clutched in her hands. Outside her door, the clang of the city gates echoed down the alley as they closed for the night.

The men upstairs would never be able to escape tonight, not with the gates closed and the night guards watching from the towers and patrolling the outside walls. But what was she to do with them? If the soldiers found them on her roof, they would kill the men. And then their god would hold her responsible for their deaths.

She shivered at the thought of the Hebrew god. While she despised the gods of Jericho, she was intrigued by the legends of this god. Of his power.

What other god had the strength to free his people from the mighty Egyptians? To lead his people through the depths of the Red Sea? The gods of her land were full of vengeance and anger. They pleased in scorning the men of Canaan and ravishing its women. But the god of the Israelites didn't destroy his people. Instead he fought for their freedom.

But why would this mighty god send his spies to a harlot's door?

She was still leaning against the door, thinking about this strange god, when someone else knocked. And she knew before she opened it that the soldiers had come looking for the spies.

Almost a dozen officers and soldiers crowded into the alley, the firelight from their torches dancing erratically along the stone walls. In the blaze of the light, she searched their faces until she found Jabin at the rear. When she met his gaze, he looked away, and she realized he'd told his commander that Rahab might be hiding the spies.

She leaned back against the doorpost, crossing her arms. Her perfume wafted down the alley, and she hoped every man could see her smile. "Do your wives know where you are?"

The commander didn't return her smile, not like he had when he visited her room late last night. "We are looking for the men in your house."

Her gaze traveled again to Jabin, skulking behind the others in the darkness. What would he do if she called out his name?

"There have been several men in my house today," she said.

The commander's eyes narrowed. "We are searching for the spies from the Israelite camp."

"Spies?" Her hands rushed to her throat. "I would not entertain a spy."

The commander stepped forward, his sword pointed at her chest. "Where are they, Rahab?"

A sigh escaped her lips, and then a laugh. She would not be intimidated by him.

She pushed aside the sword. "Would you force me to share the names of every man who visited my house today, commander? Or perhaps the names of the men who shared my bed last night?"

The man cleared his throat. "We only want the spies."

“I know nothing of spies, but two travelers visited my house tonight.”

The commander lowered his sword. “Where are they?”

“I sent them away, of course. Through the city gates.”

The commander glanced back toward the gates. “How long ago?”

“Twenty or thirty minutes, I suppose.” She glanced up at the darkened sky. “Before the sun set.”

The commander studied her for a moment, and she stood tall as he tried to intimidate her with his stare. If only the secrets that she kept for him and the other men in his command would stop him from hurting her.

She pointed toward the gates. “If you hurry, I’m certain you and your men could catch them before dawn.”

The commander lifted his sword again, and she stepped back, hoping Jabin or one of the other men would jump to her aid. But they all acted like they’d never seen her before.

Her face turned away, she waited for the commander’s sword to pierce her skin, but instead of wounding her, he shouted to the watchman behind them. “Open the gate.”

Then he and his soldiers rushed away from her, and she fell against the doorpost. None of the men looked back.

As the city gates creaked open, she locked her door again. The king would have no need of her tonight, not as he waited for news from his men. And she would see no other man either, not when she was hiding Hebrew guests in her home.

She prepared a simple meal of bread, goat’s cheese, and red wine for the men, and under the canopy of darkness, she called them forth from the rotting flax.

The younger man introduced himself as Salmon. The older man didn’t share his name, but he thanked her as he ate the food.

Salmon spoke quietly to her. “We must leave the city before the soldiers find us.”

She pointed over the wall, at the parade of torches marching away from the city.

“They will search for you where the Jordan River narrows,” she explained. “And they will search all night.”

Both men looked up at her, and in the starlight, she could see admiration in their eyes. Not at her appearance, but at the risk she had taken on their behalf.

“You have blessed us with your kindness,” Salmon said. “And your wisdom.”

No one had ever called her kind or wise before. She glanced down at the scarlet cord. He wouldn't think her a blessing if he knew why she carried it.

"I know the god above all gods has given you this land," she told them. "The king's men pretend to be strong, but we are all afraid of you for we've heard your god reigns in the heavens above and the earth below."

She wasn't afraid of the king or the commander's sword, but the god of Israel could break the mighty and uplift the lowliest of them all. Would a god as great as he be able to rescue a woman like her?

Passion bubbled up from the longings in her heart, and she fell to her knees before these men. They had to understand. "When you take our city, please swear that you will be kind to my family, as I have been kind to you."

The men glanced at each other, silent in the still of the night. She could see the torches in the distance and knew the men could see them as well.

"I know I deserve to die with the others, but please let my father and mother and my brothers and sisters live with your people. Please let them serve your god."

She pleaded with them, desperate for their mercy, but that night they gave no hope for her or her family. When she came down to her bedchamber, she removed the weight of her jewelry and hung the scarlet cord back on the post. She didn't offer her bed to Salmon or his friend that night, and neither of them came to her chamber. Instead they slept hidden among the moldy stalks on her rooftop while she lay against her pillows, wondering at it all.

What could she do to ask this god to protect her? After all she had done, she understood why he wouldn't, but if only he could hear her pleas. If only he could save her along with her family from the bondage of this house, this town. If only he could free her from the choices she had made and the slave she had become.

Before first light, the gates outside moaned as the city awoke. Scrambling back to the rooftop, Rahab watched the king's men ride into Jericho, their heads hung low in defeat. It wouldn't be long before a fresh party would be sent to resume the search.

"This way," she whispered as Salmon and his companion climbed out of the flax. She led them down into her chamber to a rope she'd lowered out of her window.

Salmon turned to her, and in the brownness of his eyes, she saw a strange mixture of compassion and strength and a power that had nothing to do with what he took from her. It was as if he saw who she was six years before, not the scarlet woman she'd become.

"You have risked your life for us," he said. "And we will offer our own lives as a security for your safety."

She sighed with relief but her words of thanks seemed frozen on her lips. She thought of the commander and Jabin and the soldiers at her door last night. In spite of all she had given those men, none of them would defend her, but she had given this man before her nothing but a place to hide, and he was offering his very life to protect her from harm.

"If you don't betray us," Salmon continued, "we will keep our promise to you and your family alike when the Lord gives us this land."

She would never betray them.

"To the north is the hill country," she instructed. "Hide there for three days while the king's men search for you. And then you can return to your wives."

Salmon watched her for a moment, and then he yanked the scarlet cord off her bedpost. At first she thought he would throw it out the window, but instead he strung it down the wall, beside the rope. "This cord will show me the way back to your window."

She nodded slowly, wondering at his words. Instead of inviting men to her bed, the cord would invite Salmon and his god to rescue her. "I will not move it."

The first spy scrambled down the rope, but Salmon lingered for another moment. "Don't tell anyone we have hidden here."

Her voice was barely a whisper. "I am the keeper of secrets."

He sat on the window's ledge. "If you and your family are inside this house when we return, none of you will be harmed."

She fingered the crimson-colored cord as Salmon and his companion edged around the side of the wall, toward the hills in the distance. She would keep this secret, but would the god of this Salmon keep his promises? Or would he betray her like the others?

She stepped away from the window, and just as Salmon made a promise to her, she made a promise to his god.

She would let the bright red threads hang from her window. She would let them flutter over Jericho's stone wall as she gathered her family. And if the Hebrew god did what Salmon promised, never again would she hang the scarlet cord outside her front door.

Salmon's Story

Salmon flung his sandals over his shoulder and glanced across the Jordan River. The waters were much higher here than at the narrow portion he and his fellow spy Nathan crossed after they left Jericho. And the river was much wider as it overflowed its banks and flooded the valley.

The Israelites were supposed to defeat Jericho, but they couldn't get to the city without crossing the Jordan and it would be impossible for all two million of them to cross here.

People crowded around him as they waited on the rocky banks. Two days ago, he and Nathan traversed the narrow part of the river by clinging to branches and rocks, but the children and elderly among them would never be able to cross even where it narrowed. The water was too deep. The current too strong. And not one of the Israelites on the shore this morning knew how to swim.

He and Nathan had done what was required of them. They'd crossed the Jordan and dressed as traders to scout the defenses of Jericho. When one of the soldiers grew suspicious of them, God directed them to the door of Rahab. The Lord had used a harlot to save their lives.

Salmon's thoughts wandered back to the fiery eyes of Rahab, filled with defiance...and with faith. In spite of the consequences she might face for harboring him and Nathan, she not only kept them safe, she showed them the way to escape in the wilderness. Jericho's soldiers never found them.

When they returned to camp, he and Nathan told Joshua all they'd seen in Jericho. The city's gates were strong; their walls fortified with guards and stone. But Rahab had told them the people of her land were terrified of the Hebrew people. The Lord had given them

the cities east of the Jordan River, and Nathan was certain the Lord would give them Jericho and the other cities west of the Jordan as well.

Forty thousand warriors marched among the Israelites, but instead of preparing them for battle, Joshua had told the entire camp to prepare for a great wonder. So Salmon dipped his toes into the wide Jordan as he and the others waited to see what God would do.

A shofar blew behind him, the blast reverberating across the hills and up the canyon to their north. As the sound subsided, the crowd parted and twelve priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant passed by Salmon. He lowered his head in reverence as the priests moved in faith toward the river.

It was much too deep for the men to wade across the Jordan, but the moment the feet of the priests touched the water, the earth began to tremble. Thunder boomed as rocks tumbled down the canyon walls, crashing into the river. And Salmon watched in awe as the Lord emptied the riverbed in front of them.

His father had told him many times the story of their people's flight from the Egyptians, how God had divided the waters of the Red Sea to free them from their slavery and guide them to the Promised Land. And now, in all of His glory and might, the God of Israel stopped this river as well to take them to the land He'd promised long ago.

People began singing praises to the Lord, their songs replacing the noise of the water. Joshua motioned the people forward, and Salmon placed his foot in the riverbed. He expected mud to ooze between his toes, but the land was dry under his feet.

Standing in the middle of the river, Salmon helped the elderly and children cross to the other side, and when everyone was safely on the west bank, the canyon shook again and water thundered back down the riverbed.

Salmon was ready to batter down the gates of Jericho and take the city, but instead of moving ahead, God told them to wait.

Forty years ago the Israelites left Egypt. Forty years they had been wandering in the wilderness, eating manna and waiting to take the land. The people had doubted the Lord. They'd complained and they'd even worshipped the golden calf instead of their God. But even so, the Lord their God had mercy on all of them. He'd delivered His justice and now He was delivering His promise to them as well.

At the camp, Salmon helped build a memorial to God's power as God removed the shame of their sin. No longer were they slaves to their past. In their obedience to God, Salmon felt the weight of his own sins slip away. In this new place, he and the others would be free to serve the Lord.

The day grew late, and in the morning he hoped they would feast on the milk and honey and roasted grains of their new land, but tonight the women prepared a meal from the sweet manna cakes that had sustained them for forty years. And together they commemorated the night back in Egypt where their ancestors had smeared the blood of a lamb on their doorposts to stop the angel of death from stealing their sons.

Salmon slipped away from the fires and festivities in the camp and leaned back against a palm tree as he watched the lights of Jericho blazing in the distance. As the Hebrews lingered in the valley, he hoped Rahab's faith would remain firm. Would she keep the crimson cord hanging from her window, even when they didn't return right away? Would she stay strong? He prayed the cord would protect Rahab and her family from death as well, like the blood the Hebrews had painted on their doorposts back in Egypt.

Salmon heard footsteps, and he turned to see his friend Nathan standing beside him.

"Are you worried?" Nathan asked.

"I know the Lord is able to rescue Rahab and her family."

"Do you think He'll ignore our promise to her?" Nathan asked.

"I pray not."

Nathan's eyes were on the city. "Either He keeps our promise or He takes our lives along with hers."

The next morning Salmon awoke to the rustling sounds of the camp. The people were packing their belongings and readying themselves for battle. He expected to hear Joshua's commands for them to take the city today, but instead their leader told them it was not yet time to fight. They would simply walk around the city this morning. And they would do the same thing tomorrow and the next day...and the next. For six days they'd walk and the only sound they'd make would be the blowing of their ram's horn.

The ground quaked as two million people rounded the wall that first day, and as they marched, Salmon watched for Rahab's scarlet cord. When he finally saw it, his heart leaped. She was waiting for them to rescue her.

He wished his faith were as strong as Rahab's. He had seen the Lord stop the Jordan and conquer the Amorite strongholds—and he was confident that somehow God would break down these massive walls of Jericho—but would He honor his and Nathan's promise to the woman along the wall?

Rahab was a Canaanite. A harlot. But the Lord had rescued Salmon and his people, washed away their sins. He prayed the Lord would do the same for this woman who had harbored him and Nathan.

For three days Salmon watched her window until he saw her face. She couldn't possibly see him in the crowd, but she lifted her hand and waved.

By the fourth day, the other people in Jericho were no longer afraid of the marching Israelites. They threw stones and jeered at them. But still the Israelites marched in silence as they trailed the golden Ark of the Covenant around the walls.

On the seventh day, the Israelites didn't march once around the city. Instead they marched seven times. And as they circled the city the seventh time, Salmon's pulse raced. The crimson cord still hung in Rahab's window, and at any moment, he expected that Joshua would shout a command so their warriors could tear down the gates and destroy the city.

The Ark of the Covenant stopped beside the city gate, and each priest raised a shofar high into the air. They blew their horns one last time.

Then Joshua yelled for the people to shout.

The Israelites shouted so loud that the ground shook under their feet. Salmon pointed his sword toward the gates, ready to fight, but as he awaited Joshua's command, he watched as a small crack threaded up one of the city walls. Then another crack followed it. And another.

The guards on top of the walls backed away from their posts and people inside the great city began to scream. Salmon dropped his sword to his side, stunned by the noise. Rocks tumbled to the ground, and he watched in amazement as the massive walls of Jericho crumbled before them. Quickly he turned toward the crimson cord trailing down Rahab's wall, but instead of falling like the other walls, her house stood strong.

For a moment there was silence as the Israelites basked in the wonder at what God had done. And then there was a giant roar as the warriors rushed over the fallen gates.

Joshua stepped up beside Salmon and Nathan. Salmon looked at the older man, awaiting his order. “Go find Rahab,” Joshua told them. “And guide her and her family out of the city before it’s destroyed.”

Salmon and Nathan didn’t hesitate. Their swords in front of them, they rushed into Jericho. The warriors fought with the king’s soldiers on both sides of them, but no one stopped him or Nathan as they climbed over the rubble of the wall.

The front door to Rahab’s house was blocked by debris so he slid his sword into his sheath and climbed up the shaky piles of stones and mortar until he was below her window. Nathan propped him up on his shoulders and then a hand reached out the window, pulling him into the room.

Rahab was as striking as he remembered, but all the jewelry and paint that had adorned her body before was gone. Her hair lay softly over her shoulders, and instead of heavy perfume, she smelled of cinnamon and smoke.

Rahab’s gaze rested on him for a moment as she thanked him. Then she turned and drew the scarlet cord out of her window.

Ten people cowered in the corner of Rahab’s chamber including an older woman who held a girl close to her.

“You are safe,” Salmon told them, but still the people didn’t move.

He took a step closer and the older woman shrieked. Stopping, he looked down at the child. “Because of the faith of your aunt—” he began.

Then he looked at the adults by the wall. “Because of the faith of your sister, your daughter, God has redeemed all of you.”

They crept forward slowly, and Salmon and Rahab worked together to help her family out the window. The earth shook again, and beside them, Salmon could see fires blazing throughout Jericho. It wouldn’t be long before the entire city was destroyed.

“Get them to a safe place,” Salmon shouted down to his friend.

As Nathan led Rahab’s family away, Salmon helped Rahab out of the window. But even as they climbed back down the rubble, Rahab clung to the scarlet cord in her hands.

Fire raged on both sides of them as they rushed toward the gates. In minutes, the entire city and the corruption inside it would burn.

But as they neared the gates, Salmon reached out and stopped Rahab.

She nodded toward the opening among the rubble. "We must hurry."
Instead of running, he pointed to her hands. "That cord no longer binds you, Rahab."
Fear filled her eyes as she clutched the threads to her chest. And then he saw resignation. "But it's who I am," she whispered.
He shook his head. "Not anymore."
Gently he took the cord from her fingers and threw it into the fire. They watched it burn for a moment, and then he reached for her hand again.
"Please come with me," he begged.
Finally she took his hand and he led her out of the city to join her family and all who had trusted in their Lord.

Author's Note

Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them white as snow.

Though they are red like crimson, I will make them white as wool.

Isaiah 1:18 (NLT)

In the years to come, Salmon became a prince of Israel. He and Rahab married and they named their son Boaz. Boaz married a Moabite widow named Ruth—a woman scarred by the sins of her people. Boaz and Ruth were the great-grandparents of a king named David. David was a man after God's heart, but in his sin, he slept with a married woman named Bathsheba.

Sin stained the lives of Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, but in the cleansing power of His mercy, God created beauty from the ashes of their lives and redeemed them. From the lineage of these three broken women was born another man, a man who was also God. A Savior.

Today the descendent of these three women, Jesus Christ, continues to redeem both men and women from their sins.