

## Rizpah

I want to share a rather obscure Old Testament story with you this morning. It is the story of a mother's love and devotion to her sons, but a dark setting for a mother's day message. I think it's been 25 years since I talked about this woman. Her name is Rizpah and the bible identifies her as a concubine of King Saul. We think of a concubine as a mistress, perhaps part of a harem. You could think of her as another wife of the king. She had at least two sons by Saul, Armoni and a son named Mephibosheth. (Saul's son Jonathan had a son whom he named Mephibosheth, perhaps named after Rizpah's son.)

The story is found in 2 Samuel 21. Saul is dead now and David is king. The nation of Israel is suffering from a three year famine caused by drought. David sought the Lord for a reason for the drought and was told, **"It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death."** 2 Samuel 21:1 Why was this such a problem?

The Gibeonites were neighbors of the Israelites. When Joshua first crossed into the promised land, the Gibeonites came to Joshua, pretended to be from a far off land and entered into a treaty with Israel that they would not be harmed. They were afraid if the Israelites knew they were neighbors, they would kill them. Even though the treaty was made under false pretense, the Israelites honored the treaty because they had sworn an oath in the name of God. When Saul became king, the story tells us, **"Now the Gibeonites were not a part of Israel but were survivors of the Amorites; the Israelites had sworn to spare them, but Saul in his zeal for Israel and Judah had tried to annihilate them."** 2 Samuel 21:2 Trying to eliminate all of Israel's enemies Saul had tried to annihilate the Gibeonites, ignoring the treaty or covenant that had been made with them in the name of the Lord. God was displeased with covenant breaking.

Allow me to point out the importance and power of covenant in the bible. A covenant of any kind was not to be taken lightly. Numerous times we read something like "And God remembered His covenant with...Abraham so he delivered Israel out of Egypt. God remembered his covenant with David so he brought the Israelites out of captivity." The signing or sealing of a covenant was to be broken only by death. It's why God hates divorce, because it is a breaking of covenant. Don't take those marriage vows lightly because God takes them very seriously!

David asked God why they were suffering from famine and God told him the reason. Instead of asking God what the solution would be, David called a meeting with the Gibeonites and asked them how to fix the problem. They said, "The man who tried to annihilate us is dead

so we can't exact punishment on him, but give us seven male descendants of King Saul and let us exact our revenge on them." David agreed to their request. Because he had made a covenant of his own with Jonathan who was also dead, David protected Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, but he gave up Saul's two sons by Rizpah, Armoni and the other Mephibosheth, along with five of Saul's grandsons, sons of his daughter Merab. The Gibeonites executed them at the beginning of the barley harvest, probably late spring and "exposed them on a hill" meaning they left them unburied. When Rizpah learned what happened, look what she did. **"Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock. From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies, she did not let the birds of the air touch them by day or the wild animals by night."** 2 Samuel 21:10

Rizpah spread sackcloth, a sign of mourning and of repentance on a rock and from the beginning of the barley harvest, late April, until the rains came, probably late spring or early summer, Rizpah remained there. She couldn't remove their bodies, the Gibeonites wouldn't allow it, but she would not allow the bodies of her sons or the other five descendants of Saul to be subjected to any further disgrace. I want to point out a few things about this strong mother and her actions that I think are important of us on this Mother's Day.

First, notice her **Incredible Devotion**. Rizpah stayed on that rock, on that hillside, with this gruesome sight before her, with the gruesome task of guarding the bodies and chasing off the vultures and wild animals, but she would not turn away. You couldn't get her to leave. If she was this devoted to the dead, how much more should we be devoted to the living!

Moms and Dads, let me encourage you today to invest in the lives of your children. It's commendable, your investment in their education, in athletics, the support you show. But we're at church this morning so let me ask you, **How devoted are you investing in their spiritual lives?** You are at church this morning so that helps. Bring them to church. Don't drop them off, come with them! They need to see faithfulness and devotion modeled. If you have children or youth, let me suggest you invest enough in their faith development that you let them attend both Sunday School and children's church or worship service. You can then go to Sunday School as well and study the foundations of our faith. Bring them Wednesday night. Encourage and facilitate their involvement and participation in the life of the church. Model that for them.

**How devoted are you passing your faith to the next generation?** Bringing them to church won't be enough. Do you pray with them and read the bible? Do you talk about the

things of God or discuss the Scripture and how it applies to their life? Do you explain the values of a follower of Christ? “This is how we live because this is what the bible says.” Do you point out the consequences and the blessings of following Jesus? We need devoted Moms and Dads if we are going to pass a living faith on to our children. It was too late for Rizpah to do anything else for her sons, but it’s not too late for us! Let’s devote ourselves to faithfully living for Jesus before our children, while we can.

**Stood diligent against the predators.** Notice that Rizpah guarded the bodies of her sons against the predators both day and night. There are predators that want to destroy and devour our children and youth. I’m not talking about just teaching them not to accept candy from strangers or stay out of internet chat rooms, I’m talking about the predators of a world view that want to seduce our children and youth. A culture that draws them away from Christ and obedience and devotion to him. Mom and Dad, stand diligently against the vultures of culture that want to prey upon your children. The world wants them to act and talk and dress and dream and live like the world-- in contrast to the call of Jesus! The devil wants to seduce us and our children with the temptation to please ourselves rather than please God. The world tells us, “be true to yourself rather than be obedient to God. Being happy is more important than being holy. Being fulfilled is more important than being obedient to God and living for Him.” Jesus said if you want to find your life you’ll need to lose it for his sake. Seek first the Lord and his kingdom and these other things will be added to you. Fulfillment is found in obeying Jesus. That’s the abundant life!

Mom and Dad, we have a responsibility to stand diligently against the predators, against the devil, against a world view that wants to undermine and destroy our children and their faith. We need to be diligent in creating an environment by our godly example and lifestyle where they see an authentic Christian faith modeled before them. Create an environment of Christian excellence, discipline and obedience to God and his word. Let’s increase our devotion to protect our children and nurture them in the ways of God!

Notice Rizpah **Responded faithfully in the face of injustice.** Saul had broken the covenant. Sons aren’t responsible for the sins of the fathers, even though we may suffer the consequences of their choices. This was an injustice done to Rizpah’s sons. Not only was the execution unjust, the biblical law required a person hanged on a tree to be buried before sunset the same day but the Gibeonites were purposefully exacting vengeance upon the descendants of Saul and their families. How amazing the faithful witness of Rizpah as she responds to the cruel

injustice and vengeance of the Gibeonites. She couldn't remove or bury the bodies. She couldn't stop their actions, but she could respond in the godliest way possible. She didn't recruit an army to respond. She didn't have power, but she wasn't powerless. She decided she could offer silent witness and faithful protest against injustice. She could refuse to allow further desecration of the bodies. By her constant presence she could act justly and faithfully against this injustice and she could make a difference.

Mothers and ladies, if you think you are powerless to make a difference in this world, think again! Think about ladies in the bible that made a difference, like Rizpah. Think of women in American history like Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama back in 1955. One faithful act that made a difference. Think about women who have gone into difficult places as missionaries to tell people about Jesus, bringing hope and affecting change.

Sandra King has been visiting Jess and Evie Muilenburg. She is the director of the orphanage in China where Adelaide, their daughter came from. She started three orphanages in China and has placed over 650 children in caring homes and families. Don't tell me because you are a woman or a mother you are powerless to affect change or to right wrongs or address injustice in the world. We don't hear a single word from Rizpah. No flower oratory, no stirring speeches, just a silent, faithful witness. "This is not right and I won't allow it to go unnoticed."

What an example this biblical mom is to all of us, standing against injustice, giving a voice to those who no longer had a voice. Are you willing to stand against injustice and stand for what's right? Are you willing to speak for those who have no voice – the unborn, the poor, the hungry, homeless, the mentally ill, refugee's fleeing oppression, the dying? As the church, we must look for ways to respond faithfully in the face of injustice in our world.

**Rizpah's devotion led to healing for the land.** I don't think Rizpah set out to make a political statement or change the mind of the King. She was just doing what a mother would do, showing unconditional love to her two sons. The Gibeonites viewed them as sons of a mass murderer. Rizpah, like any mother, just saw them as her boys, whom she loved. She loved them unconditionally. Thank God for the love of a mother. But her love led to a change of heart for David. The bible says, **"When David was told what...Rizpah...had done, he went and took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh Gilead. (They had taken them secretly from the public square at Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung**

**them after they struck Saul down on Gilboa.) David brought the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from there, and the bones of those who had been killed and exposed were gathered up. They buried the bones...in the tomb of Saul's father Kish at Zela in Benjamin...After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land.” 2 Samuel 21:11-14**

Saul and Jonathan's bodies had never been properly buried. David felt convicted and realized he needed to respectfully inter the body of the former King and that of Jonathan along with the bodies of these seven. Finally, the covenant that had been broken was atoned for, proper respect was shown by David and Israel for the bodies of Saul and his descendants, God answered prayer in behalf of the land and the drought was broken. Why? Because the Gibeonites killed the sons of Saul? I don't think so. I think it was because Rizpah took sackcloth and spread it out on a rock.

One commentary suggests the text could be translated as Rizpah “stretched the sackcloth to the Rock”, with the Rock referring to Jehovah, the Rock of Israel. Her action on that hillside was one of repentance, mourning the loss of her sons and perhaps mourning the reason for her own loss, the sin and breaking of the covenant by Saul. David asked the Lord what the cause for the drought was and the Lord told him it was because Saul killed the Gibeonites. But David didn't ask the Lord what he should do to fix it. If he had, I believe the Lord would have called him to repent on behalf of the nation, not execute seven descendants of Saul. **Rizpah did what David should have done.** She grieved and repented because of the sins of Saul and her silent witness and sorrow led to healing for Israel. Repentance, not another sacrifice or death, is what is required to heal the land.

The image of Rizpah on a rocky hillside, staring at the lifeless bodies of her sons brings to mind another mother, standing on another rocky hillside just outside Jerusalem. This time, it was the greatest injustice of all. Not the son of a king but the sinless Son of God, the King of Kings died on the cross, not for the sins of an earthly father, but for your sins and my sins and the sins of the world. Jesus gave himself as the once and for all sacrifice for sin and if we will repent and turn to him, he will forgive us of our sins. He will save us and give us a new life.

I've suggested all kinds of things today, but the most important thing I can suggest to you on this Mother's Day, is to surrender your heart and life to Jesus Christ. You want to make a difference in the destiny of your children, Mom? Surrender your life to Jesus. Give them a new Mother this Mother's Day. Be like Rizpah. Repent, be diligent, defend, take a stand.