



Rizpah

HER NAME MEANS

"A Hot Stone" or "Coal"

HER CHARACTER: Saul's concubine Rizpah was the mother of Armoni and Mephibosheth. Though a woman with few rights and little power, she displayed great courage and loyalty after the death of her sons.

HER SORROW: That her only sons were executed and their bodies dishonored because of their father's crime.

HER JOY: That the bodies of her sons were finally given an honorable burial.

KEY SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 21:8–14

Monday

HER STORY

One day a rabbi stood on a hill overlooking a certain city. The rabbi watched in horror as a band of Cossacks on horseback suddenly attacked the town, killing innocent men, women, and children. Some of the slaughtered were his own disciples. Looking up to heaven, the rabbi exclaimed: "Oh, if only I were God." An astonished student, standing nearby, asked, "But, Master, if you were God, what would you do differently?" The rabbi replied: "If I were God I would do nothing differently. If I were God, I would understand."

³As told by Joanna Laufer and Kenneth S. Lewis in *Inspired* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 5.

One day a woman named Rizpah was standing on a hill in Israel, watching the execution of seven men. Her grief was sharp, for among the dead were her own two sons. Executed for their father's crime, their bodies were left to rot on the hillside, despite a law requiring burial by sunset. Perhaps, like the rabbi, Rizpah wished she were God, even for a moment. Maybe then she would understand the "why" of what she had just witnessed.

It is not hard to imagine Rizpah's suffering. To watch as her body convulses in sorrow. To see her pound a fist against her breast to beat away the grief. *When will she turn away from the gruesome spectacle?* we wonder. But instead of fleeing the scene of her sorrow, she faces it, drawing close to bloodied bodies she once had cradled in her arms. Then she spreads sackcloth on a rock and sits down, refusing to move except to beat off birds of prey by day and jackals by night. Her vigil would last for several months—from mid-April to early October. Rizpah would not bury her grief as long as the bodies of her sons remained unburied.

Joshua had promised to live in peace with the Gibeonites, but Saul had murdered many of them during his reign, attempting to annihilate them. As a result of Saul's oath-breaking, Israel suffered a famine for three years running. In retribution, the Gibeonites had asked David for seven of Saul's male offspring. David surrendered Saul's two sons by Rizpah and five grandsons by Saul's daughter Merab. Blood was spilt for blood.

Scripture doesn't say whether Rizpah's sons shared their father's guilt. But like all mothers whose children have perished by violence—those in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Iraq, Afghanistan, our own inner cities, and even our suburbs—Rizpah must have understood the terrible link between sin and death. One person's sin is a cancer that spreads. By refusing to hide her grief, by living out her anguish in public, Rizpah gave meaning to her sons' deaths, making the entire nation face the evil of what had happened.

Finally, the rains came. Finally, the king's heart was touched. Hearing of Rizpah's loyalty and courage, David ordered the remains of the executed to be buried. He even ordered Saul's and his son Jonathan's bones to be reclaimed and buried.

Scripture doesn't say that God ordered David to hand the men over to the Gibeonites in the first place, or even that the famine ended when they were executed. Instead, as Virginia Stem Owens points out in her book *Daughters of Eve*, the Bible indicates that God answered prayers on behalf of the land after the dead were given a decent burial. David's act in honor of the dead may have signaled an end to Israel's divisions. Finally, the land could be healed and the Israelites could reunite under David's leadership.

Rizpah made the people look at the cost of sin. Like many women in ancient cultures, she had few rights and little power. But her persistent courage gave meaning to her sons' deaths and helped a nation deal with the sin of its leader. Her story is tragic; her response, memorable. Perhaps because of her, other mothers in Israel were spared a similar grief, at least for a time.

BURIAL

*R*izpah's vigil at the side of her dead sons has love as well as ritual or custom as its source. To allow these sons, these beloved though grown children, to be ravaged by the animals in the area was unthinkable to this mother. So Rizpah kept her lonely vigil, warding off the birds that would peck at their flesh and the animals that would try to drag their bodies away.

As it is today, burial in biblical times was an occasion for showing love and respect for someone who had died. Loved ones usually buried the dead the same day as the death took place, or at least within twenty-four hours (John 11:17, 39). Family members washed the body, anointed it with herbs and spices, then wrapped it in a cloth (John 11:44). The burial itself frequently took place in a cave or in a tomb hewn from the rock that is so prevalent in Palestine. The same cave or tomb would be used by many members of one family (Genesis 49:29–32).

In New Testament times, official mourning for the dead began with the playing of the flute as soon as the death took place. These mournful flute players not only played throughout the preparation for the burial, they also accompanied the procession to the place of burial and continued to play during the official time of mourning, usually seven days (Matthew 9:23). Professional mourners were often also present, accompanying the family to the grave site and staying with the family afterward, adding their wailing and tears to the family's (Jeremiah 9:17).

Even Jesus, present at the creation of the universe, wept at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:1–43). In his human nature, Jesus understood the finality of death for those who go on living. He participated in the customs of the day and wept with Lazarus's friends and family. But in his divine nature, Jesus also understood the transitory nature of life and the fact that death is not an appalling conclusion but a glorious beginning.

Read 2 Samuel 21:1–14.

1. The killings pretty much wiped out Saul's male descendants. Why would David order such wholesale executions?
2. Rizpah's vigil probably lasted several months. What do you think she went through during that time? What kept her going?
3. What do you think induced David to gather up these bones and bury them?
4. What hard or risky thing can you imagine yourself doing with the passion and determination of Rizpah?
5. How is God's love for you like Rizpah's love for her children?

*R*izpah's consistency and tenacity is a lesson for all who are inclined to give up when the going gets tough. Out of love and a need to do what was right, she stuck out bad weather, cold, fatigue, and wild animals to protect her dead sons. Finally, someone in authority took notice and did something. Her faithfulness was rewarded, and she could rest.

God promises the same to us. He asks us only to be faithful and to leave the rest up to him. Whatever the situation—harsh parents, unloving spouses, rebellious children, financial difficulties, sickness, or death—God knows and will uphold and provide in his time.

Promises in Scripture

The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in his sight.

—2 SAMUEL 22:25

*For the LORD loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.*

—PSALM 37:28

*Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

—LAMENTATIONS 3:21–23

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

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

- REFLECT ON: 2 Samuel 21:8–14.
- PRAISE GOD: For giving mothers the power to love their children so fiercely.
- OFFER THANKS: For the way other women have stood by you in times of difficulty.
- CONFESS: Any tendency to back off rather than confront important moral issues with love and courage.
- ASK GOD: To stretch your love beyond your own family circle so that it becomes a force that shapes the world around you.

Lift Your Heart

*M*others are often their children's first line of defense. How tragic when children never experience the power of a mother's protecting love. So many abused children shuffle through our social system with devastating results. So many unborn children perish quietly, with no one to mourn their passing. We cannot save all the motherless children, but we can reach out one at a time. Pray about whether you could become a "big sister" to a young girl in need. Go out of your way to make a neglected child feel welcome in your home. Speak out against the forces in our culture that devalue human life. Lend your voices to those that clamor for peace in our world. Do what you can where you can. Let your love be fierce and strong. Don't back off.

Father, thank you for my mother's protecting, persistent love. I know your own love better because of how she loved me. Help me become a spiritual mother to those you bring into my life.