

THE SAD, YET HEROIC STORY OF RIZPAH

There are two places in Scripture that we read of Rizpah. The first place is found in II Samuel 3. David was in the place of power after the death of Saul. Under God's design, David was now fulfilling his role as the king of Israel, although only Judah was recognizing this thus far. Some in the house of Saul did not want to relinquish their rights to the throne, specifically, Ishbosheth, son of Saul. Abner was the "king-maker" having pushed for Ishbosheth to be king. The Bible tells us in II Samuel 3:1 that the house of David became stronger and stronger while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker. In II Samuel 3:6 the Bible says that Abner made himself strong for the house of Saul. It appears that Ishbosheth now sees himself as the puppet king of Abner and wanting no more of it, so in II Samuel 3: 7 Ishbosheth accuses Abner of developing intimate relations with Rizpah, his father's concubine. Abner is incensed that he would receive such an accusation and moves his manipulative heart in David's direction. The rest of his story is short-lived due to the fact that Joab, David's equally manipulative general, soon murders Abner, his perceived competition. It is not clear whether a relationship between Abner and the former concubine of the late King Saul ever took place. What we do know is that in the Bible narrative, she was not able to speak out for herself and no one spoke out for her. It is really a sad state of affairs for Rizpah.

The next time and only other time in Scripture that we hear of Rizpah is in II Samuel 21. Israel had been experiencing famine for three years. When David enquired of the Lord as to why, the Lord answered that it was because of the slaughter of the Gibeonites. Israel had been in covenant with Gibeon. And God, who is a covenantal God, was very displeased with this breaking of the covenant and expressed it by withholding rain. David asked the Gibeonites what could be done to suffice this situation. The request of the Gibeonites was that seven sons of the house of Saul die for Saul's sin against them. David could not choose Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, because of the covenant between himself and Jonathan. The choice David made were the two sons of Rizpah and the five sons of Michal, who appears to have been not only the aunt of these five young men, but the step-mother as well, since the Bible designates her as the one who brought up these boys for her brother-in-law Adriel (who had been married to Michal's sister, Merab).

In this most horrendous act, Rizpah comes shining through. Her name means, "a live coal." And true to her name, she becomes a flaming coal of light in the dark world in which she lived. These seven young men were executed on a hill and were left hanging. Rizpah, without any apparent consultation with others or permission from the powers that be, took it upon herself to protect the corpses of

these young men, two of whom were her own sons. She took her sackcloth and spread it on the rock beneath and beside these hanging boys and by day fought off the birds of prey and by night fought off the wild beasts that would have come for scavenging. The Bible records in II Samuel 21:10, "And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night." The beginning of harvest would be the 16th of Nisan in the Jewish calendar, which is the beginning of our April. She continued this vigil until the to the 17th of Marchevsvan, in the Jewish calendar, which is the beginning of our October. Rizpah was exposed to the elements, fought off birds and animals day and night, and was evidently even under extreme sleep deprivation for five months! When David finally received news of her crusade, he not only took Rizpah's son's bodies, but the bodies of their five cousins and the retrieved remains of Saul and Jonathan and gave them all the burial fit for royalty. All because of a woman named Rizpah. What do we learn from this heroic lady?

1. Rizpah rose above her social station in life.

I am appalled at the family (or lack of wholesome family) structure accepted and approved by the culture of Israel and surrounding countries of this era. The Gospel of Jesus Christ changed everything, in every way, in every culture that it touched. One of the main changes is in the attitude toward women. Rizpah was a victim of the cruel culture in which she lived. She not only had to share her husband with others who were called wives, she was assigned an even lower designation, that of a concubine. This is one who had the obligations of the wife, but none of the privileges. A concubine was used and abused. Although some were treated kindly, there was always the lack of prestige and honor. The most honored of concubines were mere chattel in the hierarchy of the home.

Rizpah reveals a true mother's love. As all great mothers I have observed, they not only love their own kids, but they love all kids. We see this mother's heart in Rizpah as she protects the corpses of her son's cousins as well as her own sons. She knew the penalty that was being ascribed to these young men as defined in Deuteronomy 21:22 and 23: "And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance."

Rizpah seems to forget the scandal that swirled around her soon after the death of Saul. She forgot what others said about her or what they thought about her, she became consumed with protecting these young men. She was saying more than don't disgrace their physical bodies; she was saying in essence, do their honor no harm. They will not be picked apart by animals or by men. She was

saying, these are young men of royal inheritance; they are of far more worth than you are attributing them. I read something very touching about Eliza Hamilton, the widow of Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was a lightning rod. Admired by many, maligned by many. His widow who survived him by half a century was described by Ron Chernov in his biography, "Alexander Hamilton." He said, "Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton –purblind and deaf but gallant to the end- was a stoic woman who never yielded to self-pity. With her gentle manner, Dutch tenacity, and quiet humor, she clung to the deeply rooted religious beliefs that had abetted her reconciliation to the extraordinary misfortunes she had endured." Chernov went on explaining that she had "...a sharp intelligence, a fiercely indomitable spirit, and a memory that refused to surrender the past." Although Hamilton had been scandalized himself in his younger years and suffered death at the hands of Burr in the infamous duel, she spent the remaining years of her life defining and defending the great love of her life, Alexander Hamilton. Love protects and rises above. I Corinthians 13:13 , "And now abideth faith, hope, charity (God's love), these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

2. Rizpah did what she could.

II Samuel 21:11 says, "And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done." I cannot read these words without thinking of Mary of Bethany, of whom Jesus said in Mark 14:8, "She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying." Although Mary was not in the forefront with Peter, James and John, she took center stage when she anointed the Lord Jesus before His death on the cross for our sins.

Rizpah had no choice in the matter of requiting Gibeon for the wrongdoing of Saul. You know if this choice had been given to her, these boys would have never been hanging on that hill so far away. She couldn't keep them alive, but she could keep their death a respectable one. She was lonely and heartbroken. As far as we know these boys were all she had. She had no husband and no comfort. We don't even hear of any friends that were helping her keep vigil. But this we know, she did everything she could.

3. Rizpah brought grace to a disgraceful event.

We can never read this story without putting Rizpah in the middle of it all. Here is undying love, unquestionable loyalty and unyielding faithfulness in full display. As a result of Rizpah heroism, David is aroused in his desire to give these young men and his deceased best friend Jonathan and his father Saul the honorable burial that was deserving to kings and their progeny.

How can we view this unusual episode of young men hanging on a hill with a broken-hearted mother beneath and not think of our Lord and His broken-hearted mother beneath His cross? Galatians 3:13 tells us, "Christ hath redeemed us from

the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:" Like these young men who died, not because of their transgression, but of the sin of their fallen father, we too fell under the penalty and propensity toward sin because of the sin our father, Adam. But the good news for us is that, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:22). In the death of these seven sons of Saul, the house of Saul was vanquished. In the death of Christ, the house of David and the Church is forever established. In the disgrace of the cross, we find grace. "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). "That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:7).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.