

Rizpah: The Influence of Faithfulness



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Deut. 30:19, 2 Sam. 3:6–11, 21:1–9, Mark 13:13.*

Memory Text: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart” (*Psalms 91:4, NIV*).

The story of Rizpah is the story of an outsider playing an insider’s role. Only two biblical passages mention her explicitly, and both are connected to the early time of David’s reign, probably before the affair with Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11*). Most Bible commentators agree that the events in *2 Samuel 21–24* do not unfold sequentially after *2 Samuel 20*, but rather, they provide further information that does not fit into the general storyline of David’s life.

Rizpah exists on the edge of King David’s story. As a woman and a concubine of an earlier king, she had few options. As a matter of fact, her prospects looked bleak and dreary. Her two sons dead, the larger family of her deceased “husband” at the brink of annihilation, she nevertheless acted nobly, instead of sitting in a corner and lamenting her bad fortune. Her presence in two crucial moments of David’s history makes her a kingmaker and a nation builder. We can all learn something incredibly important from Rizpah: faithfulness is not conditioned by circumstances or good (or bad) fortunes. Faithfulness is an unconditional commitment to do what’s right regardless of the cost.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 27.*

The King's Concubine

There are many references to concubines in the Old Testament (*Gen. 25:5, 6; Judg. 8:30, 31; 2 Sam. 5:13–16; 1 Kings 11:2, 3*). What can we learn about them from these and other references?

Concubines often were taken from the ranks of female slaves or maids of a family. Their express purpose was to produce heirs, and once they had produced male offspring, their status and social standing were similar to those of regular wives. A man was regarded as his concubine's husband (*Judg. 20:4*), and their children appeared in genealogies (*Gen. 22:24*) and would receive a part of the inheritance (*Gen. 25:5, 6*). It is interesting to note that concubines appear mostly in the patriarchal period; during the early monarchy, concubines were connected to royal households.

Read 2 Samuel 3:6–11. What can we learn about Rizpah and about her circumstances in that particular time?

Rizpah, whose name means “live coal” (*see Isa. 6:6, which uses the same word*), is part of the royal household of Ishbosheth (“man of shame”), the only remaining son of Saul, who, through the help of Abner, has been made king over Israel and has moved across the Jordan to Mahanaim (*2 Sam. 2:8–10*). The mere fact that the biblical author included information about Rizpah's father (“daughter of Aiah”) suggests that her family must have been important and that she was not a slave. Ironically, the name of the son of Saul appears in another form in the genealogy of Saul, as Eshbaal, “the man of Baal” (*1 Chron. 8:33*). The form used in 2 Samuel 2:8–10 seems to be a subtle insult by the biblical author: the man of Baal is an embarrassment to the house of Saul and thus a “man of shame.”

Rizpah's personal circumstances are far from ideal. She belongs to the household of Saul, and even though the able general Abner is propping up Ishbosheth, the weak descendant of Saul, as Saul's concubine, Rizpah has no security. Her fate seems totally out of her hands, controlled by forces and circumstances way beyond her authority or control.

Jesus tells us that if a man lusts after a woman, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matt. 5:28*). However, many men of God had concubines in the Old Testament. How do we reconcile this fact with what Jesus said? (As you think of an answer, remember that just because something is mentioned in the Bible as being practiced doesn't mean God approves of it or that it is the best way to live.)

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Samuel 21:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize how the faithfulness of Rizpah, a relatively insignificant concubine of a failed king, influenced significant events in the nation of Israel.

Feel: Perceive how determined Rizpah was to do what little she could for her family, despite her great losses and powerlessness.

Do: Commit our energies to being faithful in whatever role God places us.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Bereaved Mother

A Rizpah was the mother of two of Saul's sons who were hurled to their deaths as part of the just dealings God required of David and Israel. How did Rizpah respond to this sentence?

B What action did her faithfulness awaken in David, and what was the end result for Israel?

II. Feel: Brave Defender

A Alone with her dead on a mountainside, this mother bravely fended off bird and beast day and night for many weeks. What must she have been feeling? What are we tempted to feel and do under such hopeless circumstances?

III. Do: Bleak Duty

A We may feel powerless and insignificant, but we still may choose to respond faithfully, whatever our circumstances. What challenges are facing us today in which we need to do our duty, though the outlook seems bleak?

► **Summary:** Though Rizpah suffered terrible loss, she courageously defended the bodies of her sons from marauding animals until King David responded by burying the bones of Saul and his sons, bringing both justice and peace to Israel.

The Mention of Her Name

Things are not going well for Ishbosheth in the war between the house of Saul and the house of David (*2 Sam. 3:1*). In contrast to the deteriorating situation at Ishbosheth's court, the biblical text inserts at this point in the story a list of the sons of David that are born during this time in Hebron (*2 Sam. 3:2–5*). The list reflects David's increasing strength, since sons mean a future and security.

As we have seen (*2 Sam. 3:7–10*), Ishbosheth, the “man of shame,” accuses his general, Abner, of having slept with the concubine of his father, Saul. Judging from Abner's strong reaction, this was a very serious offense.

Read the following verses and explain what sleeping with a wife or concubine of a powerful man meant in the time of the Old Testament. *2 Sam. 16:21, 22; 20:3; 1 Kings 2:21, 22.*

Rizpah is not very active in the story, which focuses on Abner and Ishbosheth. After all, she is just the concubine. She seems to be another pawn in the power play between two men. The biblical text is not clear about whether Abner really slept with Rizpah in order to try to usurp the throne. The fact that he so quickly changes sides suggests that it was just a bad rumor that had made the rounds at the improvised royal court in Mahanaim. If he really wanted to be king of Israel, would he have been so ready to join forces with David, the “anointed of the Lord”?

Abner makes good on his threat of defecting to David (*2 Sam. 3:9, 10, 12*). Ishbosheth's accusation moves the major power broker of the house of Saul to swear loyalty to the house of David, which all but ensures the demise of the house of Saul. This, in fact, came shortly after (see *2 Samuel 4*). It is really the mention of Rizpah's name that has effected this change. Although Rizpah is not active in the narrative, she is highly significant.

Without Abner's reaction to Ishbosheth's accusation, the war between the two parties most likely would have lasted much longer. We don't know what happened to Rizpah next. She reappears only in David's memoirs in *2 Samuel 21:1–14*, where she plays a subtle but incredibly important role in the bringing together of tribes and factions.

So often we find ourselves caught up in circumstances that we cannot control. What, though, can we always control, and why, in the end, is that the most important thing? See *Deut. 30:19, Mark 13:13.*

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Faithfulness is the true measure of a person’s spiritual commitment.

Just for Teachers: Help class members learn that faithfulness to God, even in things we deem small, is more important than human applause, earthly recognition, or personal accomplishments.

It has been said that God calls us to faithfulness, not to success. William Carey, sometimes referred to as the “Father of Modern Missions,” worked for seven years before winning his first convert in India. Robert Morrison, in China, and Adoniram Judson, in Burma, also waited more than five years to welcome their first converts. Similar stories can be told about work elsewhere. Had these missionaries been more concerned with signs of outward success than they were with faithfulness, they easily might have given up their calling in discouragement. Discouraging and frustrating as it must have been, they chose to be faithful to their calling and work. Their success was the eventual outcome of their faithfulness; we might even say that their faithfulness, not their converts, was the true measure of success. Had they not been faithful in very trying and challenging circumstances, they never would have experienced the joy of seeing the kingdom advance through their efforts.

Opening Activity: Using a flipchart, markerboard, and so forth, ask the class to make a list of things in nature that are very dependable. Examples might include such things as “the sun comes up every day,” “gravity pulls things down to earth,” “trees bring forth new leaves in spring,” and so forth. Discuss the biological and ecological consequences if nature failed to be dependable in these areas. While dependability is a measure of our trustworthiness with others, faithfulness expresses our desire to be trustworthy. Discuss the importance of becoming persons on whom God can depend, comparing our dependability with the examples from nature.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: In one of the parables in Matthew 25, three servants are entrusted with varying degrees of responsibility. One receives

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An Eye for an Eye or a Convenient Solution?

There is a bad famine in Israel. The Hebrew text emphasizes the long period without any rain (“for three years, year after year”). This was not normal. People considered God directly responsible for giving rain and withholding rain. David sought “the face of the Lord.” We are not told by what means he received God’s answer, but its content was very clear: “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house” (2 Sam. 21:1, *ESV*).

Read 2 Samuel 21:1–6. Why should Saul’s descendants suffer for their forefather’s guilt? Does this not contradict Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:29, 30; and Ezekiel 18:1–4?

This is a hot issue and causes debates among scholars. Where is God’s justice here? Is justice something collective or something individual? Some commentators suggest that David used the famine as a convenient excuse to get rid of possible rivals for the throne and that the “[speaking] of the Lord” in 2 Samuel 21:1 was a clever manipulation of divine messages for David’s own purpose; yet, there is no indication in the biblical text that this was David’s motivation. What the text clearly states is that Saul sought to annihilate the Gibeonites, who are connected with the “Amorites,” the original inhabitants of Canaan before Israel took control of Palestine.

The text highlights a very important principle of Scripture: although salvation may depend on our decisions, our actions and choices affect those around us and never take place in isolation. When faithful kings reigned in Jerusalem, Judah followed God’s law and sought to live accordingly; on the other hand, unfaithful kings brought down many in Israel.

In the historical texts of the Old Testament, there are no references to Saul’s attempt to destroy the Gibeonites. However, the example of Saul’s revenge on the priestly town of Nob (1 Samuel 21) suggests that Saul was capable of this. Saul’s zeal looks good from the outside (after all, the Gibeonites were foreigners), but the divine evaluation of this act underlines God’s high regard for faithfulness (*Josh. 9:15–21*). God expects us to honor our promises. As we will see, Rizpah gives us (and King David!) an object lesson in faithfulness.

Though we don’t fully understand why there should be a famine because of Saul’s sins, we must always remember that our actions come with consequences—always. Yet, as Christians, shouldn’t we avoid doing wrong, not because of the potential consequences of the act but because of the wrongness of the act itself? What keeps you in line more: fear of the consequences of your wrong actions, or your desire not to do wrong, period?

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five units, another two, and still another, one. Regardless of the amount, each one was expected to be faithful. The first two were faithful and were acknowledged by the landowner when he returned from his journey. The last was not. Humanly speaking, we may be tempted to excuse the last servant, thinking that he received comparatively small responsibilities. Should it matter that much, since there were fewer opportunities for him? God, however, does not operate that way. Faithfulness is not merely expected but required from everyone sharing in the divine distribution. Rizpah, a barely noticed character inside Scripture's pages, offers our current narcissistic generation a solid example of faithfulness, even though being largely unnoticed. Like the temple widow who faithfully deposited her pittance into the temple treasury, Rizpah inspires future generations through her dependability regarding the mundane and nonglamorous.

Bible Commentary

I. The King's Concubine (*Review 2 Samuel 3:6–11 with your class.*)

Perhaps it is true that the most difficult instrument to play is “second fiddle.” Such was the predicament of concubines in ancient civilizations. Never fully accepted as wives, valued primarily for their capacity to produce offspring, these women existed as chattel, with few opportunities and negligible rights. Often doormats for male-dominated cultures, they could expect that their children would be overlooked for the offspring of full wives, that full marital relationship would be perpetually denied them, and that the “abundant life” was reserved for someone else.

Generally speaking, this was Rizpah's lot in life. Complicating her situation, her husband was killed in disgrace, she was implicated in an illicit relationship with the ranking general, plus her sons—the primary means of support for a husbandless concubine were executed at David's command. Seldom have prescriptions for despondency and even suicide been more potent! Despite these foreboding circumstances, however, Rizpah is remembered for faithfulness in the teeth of despair!

Consider This: How does my faithfulness rank when I am passed over for church leadership positions even though my qualifications clearly exceed those of people chosen ahead of me? Or although my importance ranking within society is minimal, how can I exhibit faithfulness? Or how did an “unimportant” slave girl influence history by

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Faithfulness Is a Way of Life

David consents to the request of the Gibeonites, and seven descendants of Saul are found. It is here that we meet Rizpah again. Her two sons by King Saul are among the ones selected to be executed so that “atonement” can be achieved. Second Samuel 21:3 uses the Hebrew word *kaphar*, which functions as a technical term to mark atonement and also appears in contexts such as the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

Read 2 Samuel 21:1–9. How are we to understand this passage? Or can we understand it? In what ways is this an example of something in Scripture that we can’t fully explain but that we simply need to trust the Lord on? What other examples like this (of things that we don’t fully understand) can you find in the Bible in which, despite our lack of understanding, we need to trust in God’s goodness and mercy anyway?

David remembers his promise to his friend Jonathan (*1 Sam. 20:12–17, 42*), and consequently, he does not surrender Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth to the Gibeonites. This emphasizes an important point in the biblical text: even though Saul broke Israel’s vow to the Gibeonites, David honors his vow to Jonathan, even after his death.

What does Rizpah do when her sons are killed? *2 Sam. 21:9, 10*. What does this tell us about her?

The author emphasizes his high regard for Rizpah’s actions by again mentioning her father’s name (*cf. 2 Sam. 3:7*), in contrast to David, who is not referred to as king or by his lineage. We only can imagine Rizpah’s pain and grief as she watches over the seven bodies of the executed. She builds a makeshift hut from sackcloth, and there, under the open sky, she camps close to the decomposing bodies and protects them from desecration by birds and animals. Rizpah does not do this for one day or seven days, but it appears that she watches over the bodies for many weeks, until the autumn rains begin. Not only is Rizpah a devoted mother, but she stands out as an example of faithfulness in the midst of a story dominated by men who are not always faithful.

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faithfully sharing her faith with the slave master Naaman? Or how was a civilization preserved through the faithfulness of a slave named Joseph?

II. Faithfulness Is a Way of Life *(Review 2 Samuel 21:1–9 with your class.)*

“In the ancient Near East it is common for the king to be understood as the embodiment of the state and representative of the people. During the reign of the Hittite king Mursilis, a twenty year plague was determined to have been the result of offenses committed by his predecessor, and attempts were made to appease and make restitution.”—John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 350. While David’s attempt to rectify Saul’s misconduct against the Gibeonites may scandalize the modern mind as barbaric, it must be recognized that he was trying, within his contemporary cultural milieu, to repair a breach of faithfulness occasioned by Saul. However we may disdain David’s means and question his motives, this passage suggests that Christians should consider their obligations to be faithful to what they have promised to do as individuals.

Additionally, the narrative of 2 Samuel 21:1–9 prompts a sobering question that Christians also must ask themselves: to what extent do promises made by their government, culture, and ancestry obligate them to faithfulness?

Consider This: What responsibility might we have for being faithful to the promises of bygone generations? Why should we exercise care about obligating future generations by promises we make?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: When Rizpah protected the corpses of the executed, it was brought to David’s attention. Apparently he was impressed by her noble actions. While not enjoying status, celebrity, or notoriety, we may be placed by the Lord in positions in which we may influence government officials and leaders of society. God’s people may be unaware that they are being observed by society’s elite; their faithfulness, however, has changed the course of history more than once.

One unassuming person who profoundly influenced his nation was Desmond Doss, the World War II hero who was awarded the Medal of Honor. Credited with saving hundreds of lives during multiple engagements in the Pacific

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Building a Nation

Rizpah's example of faithfulness comes to David's attention. The biblical author again includes the complete pedigree of Rizpah when David is told about her action. She is not just any mother; she is the daughter of Aiah and the concubine of Saul. Her being on the mountain "before the Lord," close to the seven bodies, seems to motivate David to consider a very important act: he orders the proper reburial of Saul, Jonathan, and the descendants of Saul.

Read 2 Samuel 21:11–14. How was David affected by Rizpah's actions?

Many of Israel's neighbors considered a proper burial to be essential to the deceased's ability to reach a place where the gods would mete out judgment. The pyramids in Egypt were huge tombs, testifying to the importance of burial in Egyptian culture. In contrast, Israel's burial practices were not elaborate, because the biblical authors considered death to be a state of no consciousness (*Eccles. 9:5, 6*). This funeral, however, is very significant, as it marks the end of intertribal fighting and lays the foundation for a united Israel.

Read again 2 Samuel 21:1–14. What caused the end of the famine?

The famine does not end after the seven descendants of Saul are executed. God responds to the plea for the land only after David has provided a respectable resting place for the remains of Saul and his descendants. In other words, although justice and righteousness are important elements of our interaction with one another, reconciliation is required as well. Rizpah's example of faithfulness, even under hopeless and desperate conditions, appears to have brought about faithfulness and reconciliation on a much larger scale, resulting in an Israel that can begin to heal the wounds of intertribal warfare. Rizpah's role in this crucial part of David's reign teaches an important lesson that echoes through the centuries: circumstances alone do not make or break a child of God; rather, we determine by our choices, for good or bad, whether we will be pawns or whether our quiet faithfulness will powerfully influence the lives around us. By living faithfully, Rizpah subtly influenced the outcome of a nation.

Look at the power of example: through Rizpah's actions, the concubine of David's enemy greatly influences David. What should this tell us, regardless of who we are, about the power of our influence? Think about those whom you are influencing. How might you be a better influence than you are right now?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Theater, he nearly lost his own in the Battle of Okinawa. Although ridiculed and harassed for being faithful to his convictions regarding non-combatancy and Sabbath observance, he nevertheless earned respect from his commanders and fellow soldiers.

Thought Question:

The same attitude that caused Doss to refuse to fire a weapon was the same one that caused him to act so bravely in the face of danger. What attitude was that, and why is it so important?

Application Question:

In what ways are we called to do something similar, regardless of how different the immediate circumstances?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Faithfulness in things considered small often forms the basis for faithfulness in the bigger decisions of life. Faithfulness in the simple matter of choosing an appropriate diet prepared Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for the history-changing showdown regarding worship on the plain of Dura. It also prepared Daniel to stand firm regarding worship, knowing that his decision would lead him to the lions' den. Rizpah's example is not headline material but represents the hundreds of daily decisions we all make that corporately frame our character.

Activity: As a class, create a photo montage of simple acts of faithfulness that are repeated every day. This can be done utilizing stock photos that appear in newspapers and news magazines or by taking your own pictures as a group activity.

What do each of these ideas collectively illustrate to us about being faithful? What does faithfulness in the small things teach us about faithfulness in the big? Why is it difficult—or even impossible—to have one without the other?

Alternate Option: To do this activity without photos, ask class members to picture in their minds the simple acts of faithfulness that they are thankful for every day. Ask for a few class members to share, or describe, their picture of faithfulness. Then ask the questions provided above.

Further Study: “The gospel is a message of peace. Christianity is a system which, received and obeyed, would spread peace, harmony, and happiness throughout the earth. The religion of Christ will unite in close brotherhood all who accept its teachings. It was the mission of Jesus to reconcile men to God, and thus to one another.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 47.

“It is one thing to read and teach the Bible, and another thing to have, by practise, its life-giving, sanctifying principles engrafted on the soul. God is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. If those who claim to be his followers draw apart, showing no affectionate or compassionate interest in one another, they are not sanctified to God. They have not his love in their hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, March 17, 1910.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** In your Sabbath School class, think of ways to demonstrate God’s faithfulness to the people of your community who do not know God personally.
- 2** What is faithfulness? Have different class members define faithfulness, using biblical characters as examples.
- 3** Many times we seem to be helpless and without any choices in our circumstances. What can we learn from a woman such as Rizpah, who, despite her circumstances, acted so faithfully before the Lord?
- 4** Men of God with concubines? Descendants suffering for the sins of their fathers? This story leaves the modern reader with a lot of unanswered questions. Of course, as with everything in life, there are always unanswered questions. Part of what it means to live by faith is to live with unanswered questions (after all, if all things were answered, where would the need for faith come in?). How have you learned to live with the unanswered questions in your own existence? What have you learned from not having answers that could help someone else who struggles with questions that beg for answers that, for now, aren’t coming?
- 5** Dwell more on the power of example. Who are the powerful examples in your culture and society? Are they good or bad examples? What about your own example? What kind of influence do you think you have on those who watch your behavior? How different is your example at home from your example in public or in church? Would those who might admire your example in public be shocked if they saw your example at home?