

# Rizpah: Being Faithful



## SABBATH—NOVEMBER 20

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Deuteronomy 30:19; 2 Samuel 3:6–11; 2 Samuel 21:1–9; Mark 13:13.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “He [God] will cover you with his wings. Under the feathers of his wings you will find safety. He is faithful. He will keep you safe like a shield or a tower” (Psalm 91:4, NIV).

**THE STORY OF RIZPAH IS THE STORY OF AN OUTSIDER PLAYING AN INSIDER'S PART (ROLE).** Rizpah is named two times in the Bible. Both are connected to the early time of David's rule, probably before the affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Most Bible experts agree that the events of 2 Samuel 21–24 do not come in a series after 2 Samuel 20. Instead, they provide additional information that does not fit into the story line of the life of David.

Rizpah plays a small part in the story of King David. She had very limited choices as a woman and a concubine<sup>1</sup> of an earlier king. Her future seemed very dark and hopeless. Both of her sons were dead. The larger family of her dead “husband” were almost all dead. But Rizpah did not sit in a corner and mourn over her bad luck. Instead, Rizpah appears in two very important moments in David's history. She becomes, in her way, a king-maker and a nation-builder. We can all learn something very important from Rizpah. Her faithfulness is not controlled by events, whether they be good or bad. Faithfulness is doing what is right, no matter what the cost is.

1. concubine—an unmarried woman who has sex with a man and lives with the man and his wife or wives.

**SUNDAY—NOVEMBER 21****THE KING'S CONCUBINE  
(2 Samuel 3:6–11)**

**The Old Testament mentions concubines several times (Genesis 25:5, 6; Judges 8:30, 31; 2 Samuel 5:13–16; 1 Kings 11:2, 3). What can we learn about them from these and other examples?**

Concubines were often the female slaves or maids of a family. Their purpose was to have sons. Once they had male children, their position and social standing were almost the same as those of regular wives. A man was known as his concubine's husband (Judges 20:4). And their children appeared in family histories (Genesis 22:24). The children then would get a part of the inheritance<sup>2</sup> (Genesis 25:5, 6). It is interesting that concubines appear mostly in the times of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. During the early kingdoms (Saul's, David's, and Solomon's), concubines were connected only to royal households.

**Read 2 Samuel 3:6–11. What can we learn from these verses about Rizpah and about her situation in that time?**

The name Rizpah means "live coal" (see Isaiah 6:6, which uses the same word). She is part of the royal household of Ishbosheth ("man of shame"). Ishbosheth is the only remaining son

of Saul at this time. With the help of Abner, Ishbosheth has been made king of Israel and has moved across the Jordan to Mahanaim (2 Samuel 2:8–10). The writer of this story includes information about Rizpah's father ("daughter of Aiah"). This tells us that her family must have been important and that she was not a slave. The name of Ishbosheth appears in another form in the family history of Saul, as Eshbaal, "the man of Baal" (1 Chronicles 8:33). The form used in 2 Samuel 2:8–10 seems to be an insult by the Bible writer: the man of Baal is an embarrassment to the house of Saul. This is how a "man of shame" appears.



Rizpah's name means "live coal."

The situation Rizpah finds herself in is very dangerous. She belongs to the household of Saul. Abner, a strong and smart general, is supporting Ishbosheth, the weak son of Saul. But as a concubine of Saul, Rizpah has no protection or safety. Her future seems totally out of her hands. It is controlled by events far beyond her power or control.

2. inheritance—money, property (land), and so on, that is received from someone when that person dies.

Jesus tells us that if a man lusts after a woman, he already has committed (done) adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28). But many men of God had concubines in the Old Testament. How do we make sense of this fact when we think about what Jesus said? (As you think of an answer, remember that just because something is written in the Bible does not mean God approves of it or that it is the best way to live.)

### MONDAY—NOVEMBER 22

#### THE MENTION OF RIZPAH'S NAME IN THE BIBLE (2 Samuel 16:21, 22)

Things are not going well for Ishbosheth in the war between the house of Saul and the house of David (2 Samuel 3:1). The situation at the court of Ishbosheth is going downhill. The Bible shows, at this point, a list of the sons of David that are born during this time in Hebron (2 Samuel 3:2–5). The list also shows the growing strength of these sons. Sons mean a future and safety.

As we have learned (2 Samuel 3:7–10), Ishbosheth, the “man of shame,” accuses (blames) his general, Abner, of sleeping with the concubine of his father, Saul. If we judge by how angry Abner gets, we understand that this was a very serious crime.

**Read 2 Samuel 16:21, 22; 2 Samuel 20:3; and 1 Kings 2:21, 22. Then explain what sleeping with a wife or concubine of a powerful**

**man meant in the time of the Old Testament.**

Rizpah herself does not have a big part in the story. Instead, the story focuses on Abner and Ishbosheth. After all, Rizpah is just the concubine. She seems to be another chess piece in the power play between two men. The Bible verse is not clear about whether Abner really slept with Rizpah in order to try to take over the throne. The fact that Abner quickly changes sides tells us that it was just a bad rumor going around in the king's court in Mahanaim. If Abner really wanted to be king of Israel, why would he join forces with David, the “anointed [chosen] of the Lord”?



**Rizpah seems to be another chess piece in the power play between two men.**

Abner makes good on his threat and goes to David (2 Samuel 3:9, 10, 12). Ishbosheth, in his foolishness, has made the most important supporter of the house of Saul swear loyalty to the house of David. There is now no doubt that the house of Saul will

fall. This downfall happens very soon after Abner leaves (read 2 Samuel 4). But it is really Rizpah's name that has caused this change. Rizpah is not active in the story, but she is very important to what happens.

Without Abner's angry answer to Ishbosheth's charge, the war between the two houses probably would have lasted much longer. We do not know what happened to Rizpah next. We only read about her again in 2 Samuel 21:1–14. In this book, Rizpah plays a small but very important part in the bringing together of tribes and families.

**We often find ourselves in the middle of events we cannot control. But what can we always control? Why, in the end, is that the most important thing? Read Deuteronomy 30:19; Mark 13:13.**

## TUESDAY—NOVEMBER 23

### AN EYE FOR AN EYE OR AN EASY ANSWER? (2 Samuel 21:1–6)

There is a bad famine<sup>3</sup> in Israel. The Hebrew verse tells us about the long period without any rain (“for three years, year after year”). This was not normal. People thought that God could give rain and also withhold<sup>4</sup> rain. David prayed to “the face of the Lord.” We are not told how David receives God's answer. But his

command is very clear: “It is because Saul and his family committed [did] murder” (2 Samuel 21:1, NIV).

**Read 2 Samuel 21:1–6. Why should the children of Saul suffer for their forefather's guilt? Does their suffering go against (disagree with) what is written in Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:29, 30; and Ezekiel 18:1–4?**

This is a difficult issue and causes many debates among Bible thinkers. Where is God's justice here? Is justice something collective (for groups) or something individual (for persons)? Some thinkers feel that David used the famine (lack of food) as an excuse to get rid of rivals for the throne. They also argue that what God says in 2 Samuel 21:1 was used by David for his own purpose. But there is no proof of this in the Bible. What the verses say is that Saul tried to destroy and wipe out the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites are connected with the Amorites, the original people who lived in Canaan before Israel took control of the land.

The verses show a very important principle (rule) of the Bible. Salvation<sup>5</sup> may depend on our decisions (choices). But our actions and choices influence<sup>6</sup> people around us. When faithful kings ruled in Jerusalem, Judah followed God's law and tried to live by the law. But unfaithful kings brought down many in Israel.

3. famine—when there is not enough food and many people go hungry.

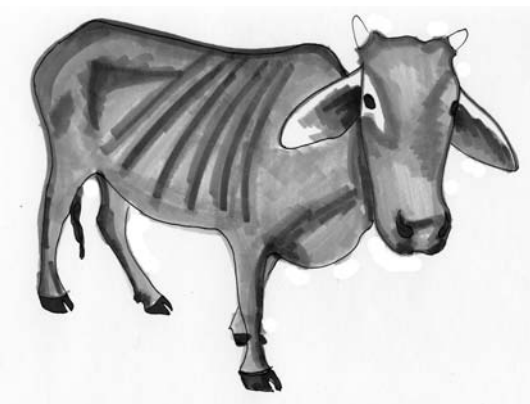
4. withhold—to not give something; to hold something back.

5. salvation—God's plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life; being saved from sin or evil.

6. influence—to affect or change someone or something in an indirect but usually important way.

There are no verses in the Old Testament showing that Saul has tried to destroy the Gibeonites. But the example of Saul's revenge on the priestly town of Nob (1 Samuel 21) suggests that Saul could do this. His actions look good from the outside. (After all, the Gibeonites were foreigners.) But God expects us to honor our promises.

**We may not understand why there should be a famine because of the sins of Saul. But we must always remember that our actions come with results—always. As Christians, we should avoid doing wrong. We should avoid wrongdoing not because we fear the results of the act but because the act itself is wrong. What keeps you in line more: fear of the results of your wrong actions or your desire not to do the wrong thing?**



**Saul's sin caused a famine in the time of David.**

### **WEDNESDAY—NOVEMBER 24**

#### **FAITHFULNESS IS A WAY OF LIFE (2 Samuel 21:1–9)**

David agrees to what the Gibeonites ask. Seven sons and relatives of Saul are found. It is here that we meet Rizpah again. Her two sons by King Saul are among the ones chosen to be killed as “atonement.” Second Samuel 21:3 uses the Hebrew word *atonement*, meaning “forgiveness through payment.”

**Read 2 Samuel 21:1–9. How do we understand these verses? Or can we understand them? In what ways are they an example of something in the Bible that we cannot fully explain? Or are they telling us that we simply need to trust the Lord? What other difficult-to-understand examples can you find in the Bible that show that, even when we do not understand something, we need to trust in God's goodness and mercy?<sup>7</sup>**

David remembers his promise to his friend Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:12–17, 42). As a result, David does not surrender (give up) Jonathan's son Mephibosheth to the Gibeonites. This act makes an important point in the Bible: Saul broke the promise Israel made to the Gibeonites, but David honors his promise to Jonathan, even after his death.

<sup>7</sup> mercy—kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly.



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

The writer of the book of Samuel shows high respect for Rizpah's actions by bringing up the name of her father again (read 2 Samuel 3:7). He does not speak of David as king or speak of his lineage. We can only imagine the pain and grief of Rizpah as she watches over the bodies of the seven who were killed. She builds a tent from sackcloth. There, under the open sky, she camps close to the rotting bodies and protects them from being eaten by birds and animals. Rizpah does not do this for only a few days. She watches over the bodies for weeks until the autumn rains begin. Rizpah is a devoted mother. And she stands out as an example of faithfulness in a story controlled by men who are not always faithful.



Rizpah faithfully protects the seven dead bodies from birds and wild animals.

**THURSDAY—NOVEMBER 25**

**BUILDING A NATION  
(2 Samuel 21:11–14)**

Rizpah's example of faithfulness comes to the attention of David. The writer again tells the complete background of Rizpah when someone tells David about her action. She is not just any mother. She is the daughter of Aiah and the concubine of Saul. She has been on the mountain "before the Lord," close to the seven bodies. This seems to encourage David to do something very important: he orders the proper burial of Saul, Jonathan, and the children of Saul.

**Read 2 Samuel 21:11–14. How was David influenced by<sup>8</sup> the actions of Rizpah?**

Many of Israel's neighbors considered a proper burial very important. It was considered the only way for the dead to reach a place where the gods would judge them. The pyramids in Egypt were huge tombs. They show how important burial was in Egyptian culture.<sup>9</sup> But the burial practices in Israel were simple. This is because the writers of the Bible knew that the spirit sleeps during death.

**Read 2 Samuel 21:1–14 again. According to these verses, what ended the famine?**

The famine does not end after the seven sons and relatives of Saul are killed. God gives peace to the land only after the remains of Saul and his sons and relatives are given burial in a proper resting place. This story serves as a reminder that justice

8. influenced by—to be affected or changed by the power of another person or thing.

9. culture—the beliefs, customs, arts, and so on of a particular society, group, place, or time.

and righteousness (holy living) are important parts of our relationships with others. But reconciliation (peace with others) is just as important. The example of Rizpah and her faithfulness, even under hopeless conditions, appears to have brought faithfulness, forgiveness, and peace to Israel. Finally Israel can heal from the wounds of warfare among the tribes. Rizpah's role (part) in this important part of the reign (rule) of David teaches us an important lesson thousands of years later: situations or events do not make or break a child of God. Instead, we make our choices, for good or bad. We can choose to be nothing more than chess pieces, or we can choose to be something more. We can let our quiet and faithful witness influence the lives around us. By living faithfully, Rizpah influenced the outcome of a nation.

**Think about the power of example: through Rizpah's actions, this concubine of David's enemy greatly influences David. What should this tell us about the power of our influence,<sup>10</sup> no matter who we are? Think about those whom you are influencing. How could you be a better influence than you are right now?**

### FRIDAY—NOVEMBER 26

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** "It is one thing to read and teach the Bible and another thing to practice its life-giving, soul-building principles. God is in Christ,

bringing back the world to Himself. If those who claim to be His followers separate, showing no love or mercy for one another, they have not truly given themselves to God. They do not have God's love in their hearts."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, March 17, 1910.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① In your Sabbath School class, think of ways to show the faithfulness of God to the people of your community who do not know God personally.
- ② What is faithfulness? Have different members of the class describe faithfulness. Have them use Bible characters<sup>11</sup> as examples of faithfulness.
- ③ Many times in our lives we seem to be helpless and without any choices. What can we learn from a woman like Rizpah, who acted so faithfully before the Lord?
- ④ Think more about the power of example. Who are some 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 what you do? How different is your example at home from your example in public or in church? Would those who look up to your example in public be shocked if they saw your example at home?

10. influence—the power to change or affect someone or something.

11. characters—people who appear in a story, book, or play.