

Today we continue our look at some of the women whose stories in the bible often get overlooked. Last week we thought about Huldah, who was a prophet. Today we're looking at Rizpah and, if you were following the reading, you might well be wondering why. She is a woman who appears twice in the bible and both times it appears that she is the victim. I wonder if you ever feel like that? Something is going on in your life, and you've no control over it, and as far as you're concerned it's not your fault, and you find yourself a victim.

We're at a time in the history of Israel when all but David's own tribe were with Saul but Saul had been defeated, and he and three of his sons were killed.

So, what is the background to the reading today? *2 Samuel 3:6-7 During the war between the house of Saul and the house of David, Abner had been strengthening his own position in the house of Saul. 7 Now Saul had had a concubine named Rizpah daughter of Aiah. And Ish-Bosheth said to Abner, "Why did you sleep with my father's concubine?"*

If anyone was to have sexual relations with one of the king's women, whether it was the king's wife or the king's harem, that was understood as an attempt to take the throne. Now, what's going on here in 2 Samuel 3 is that Saul has died, and Ishbosheth Saul's son has now accused Abner, Saul's General, of having sexual relations with Rizpah. He suspects that Abner is attempting to become king in the house of Saul. Abner denies vigorously that he laid a hand on Rizpah, and it's actually this incident that causes Abner to transfer his allegiance to David and bring the tribes of Israel over with him. We don't know from the Bible whether Abner was guilty of sleeping with Rizpah - but either way, it doesn't really matter whether he did or whether he didn't, the accusation makes him change sides. It has been suggested that Rizpah might have instigated their relationship to try and secure a better future for her children – obviously, that didn't work. Given Abner's strong denial and switch of sides, I suspect nothing happened but we don't know.

In 2 Samuel 21:1 we read that there was a famine in the land. Deuteronomy 28 tells us that famine in Israel was often for divine chastisement, to bring His people away from sin to repentance and faith in Himself. So, David and his kingdom are experiencing a famine, and he goes to God and enquires what the reason is, and God tells him that it's because Saul broke the covenant with the Gibeonites. That story is in Joshua 9:3-27, and that is that about 400 years earlier the Gibeonites lived in Canaan before the Israelites inhabited it. They tricked Joshua into a treaty and a covenant to guarantee their protection and security in the promised land. If you read the story, they made out that they were foreigners coming to serve the Living God, when really they were their very close neighbours whom God had told the Israelites to cleanse from the land. They duped Joshua, and he gave his word, and it was before God, and Joshua and the Israelites had to honour it - but now King Saul comes along, 400 years after this event, and he breaks the treaty and he tries to exterminate the Gibeonites from Israel. Verse 2 says that his motivation was zeal for the children of Israel.

Now, here are several lessons from the behaviour of Saul before we even look at the character of Rizpah. Righteous zeal for God is often the motivation for heroic faith, but we need to note that misdirected zeal can have serious and long, far-reaching consequences. Saul's zeal may have expressed a sincere desire to do something he felt was right, but he did something that was wrong. So that means that you cannot always trust your zeal. Paul says in Romans 10:1-2 *Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.*

You couldn't get anyone more zealous for God than a Jew, particularly the Pharisees. Paul says that of his own self in his biographical text in Philippians 3:4-6, he says: *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*

He was wrong; he was an enemy of God.

You can't trust your zeal all the time, but a second lesson is that the time that transpired from these events did not nullify the covenant with the Gibeonites that Joshua had made, nor did it erase Saul's

sin against them. So, 400 years had passed since Joshua made the covenant with the Gibeonites, several years have now passed since Saul had sinned against them, now David is suffering because of Saul's slaughter - but time didn't change anything. The promise had been made and broken and there were consequences. We don't really pay much attention to that idea today but I think we should take it more seriously.

David asks God and finds out that the famine is because of this broken promise, so he goes to the Gibeonites and asks what would make things right. What the Gibeonites wanted was life for life, and so they requested seven offspring, males, seven sons of Saul to die. Two of those sons were Armoni and Mephibosheth, Rizpah's sons, the other five were Saul's grandsons. David gave permission for them to be hanged after being executed, and there they hanged for the sins of the father - exposed, impaled to a pole in Gibeah. Incidentally, Gibeah in 1 Samuel 10:26 is designated as the capital city for Saul's reign. The consequences of Saul's sin come full circle.

Now you might say: 'Well, it's not really fair, is it, that these two sons of Saul and five grandsons should suffer for their father and grandfather's sins?'. Well, it's not really fair that you should suffer for somebody else's selfish sins, or Rizpah should suffer for other men's sins, but she did - that's a fact of life, it is part of the fall, we suffer because of what others do. But maybe your next question is, and it certainly should be: 'But if this was wrong, why did David go along with it? You wouldn't think he would allow something that was unjust'. Well, you're probably right. Indeed Deuteronomy 24 verse 16 prohibits punishment of a son for his father's sins.

In this instance we never find David reprimanded by God for taking this action, and it may well be that David was just, and the Gibeonites were just - and when it says that this was a judgement for Saul's bloodthirsty house, it may be that Saul was not the only one involved with this, but perhaps these two sons of Rizpah and five grandsons of Saul were also party to this murder and extermination of the Gibeonites.

As we have just read, the story doesn't end with the death of her sons. Rizpah was determined to guard their bodies. She spread sackcloth over the rock, which was symbolic of grief, and settled down to keep the bodies safe from birds and animals. It's hard for us to imagine this, but for about five months (beginning of the harvest until the rainy season), day and night she kept vigil over her son's remains.

How did she get through it? Sheer love that was birthed in a devotion that was characterised by a determination that was second to none. She wasn't deterred by her hunger, by exhaustion, by the stench of the decomposing bodies, by her own grief, by the hopelessness of her situation, by the reactions of others who passed by - but her tribulation worked patience, and her patience experience, and her experience hope. She never gave up! She loved, and because she loved she was devoted, and because she was devoted, she persevered, and because she persevered, it gave birth to hope in her heart. How do you get through? How do I get through? Hope. You see when you lose hope, you lose everything.

Could any good come out of this? We have seen how things came to this, how she got through this, it's very hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel of such an experience. One author has said: 'By refusing to hide her grief, by living it out in public, Rizpah gave meaning to her son's deaths, making the entire nation face the evil of what had happened'. That's exactly right: could any good come out of this? David heard of her devotion, of her love, of her sacrifice, and it touched his heart. We read that he took steps to give a decent burial to these two men and the other five.

*2 Samuel 21:12-13 he went and took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh Gilead. (They had stolen their bodies from the public square at Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them after they struck Saul down on Gilboa.) 13 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.*

Did any good come out of this awful situation? Yes. Not only did this woman, because of her hope, get her two sons buried, but she pricked the conscience of a King who remembered a similar situation

where Saul and his son Jonathan, who David loved, were slain and hung, impaled to the wall of the city of Bethshan - and how the brave men of Jabesh Gilead went, against all odds, and retrieved their dismembered bodies and buried them there. David realised that they had not been given a proper burial the way they should have been, and his conscience was moved to do it - why? Because of Rizpah! David's action is directly related to the determined devotion of an insignificant concubine called Rizpah. Surely now this used and abused victim had come into her own?

It shows you, doesn't it, the power of one? Can I say to you ladies: the power of one woman, one woman who knew suffering and yet one highly compassionate, deeply loving, devoted woman who persevered, never lost hope, who turned the heart of a King - what a woman! The world needs women, and men, like that today.

What do we learn from Rizpah?

The first is a lesson on loss, a lesson on bereavement and sorrow. I've read several commentators who comment on Rizpah - and there are very few, I have to add - but they would accuse Rizpah of inordinate grief. To put it in our words, she was going a bit over the top. I don't know what you think of that, and I have to say that there is a danger that we can absorb ourselves in a hopeless grief over a long period of time, but I feel that those who accuse Rizpah of this are trying to take her out of the context in which she is experiencing this grief. We don't know, no commentator or Bible teacher knows, what she was going through. Incidentally, none of us knows what anyone else is going through when they are grieving. That's why we should be slow to judge others concerning how they grieve because people grieve differently. Don't be like some people who think that after a few weeks you should be just getting over it, and getting on with your life. It's not like that for everyone. Sometimes people cope with their grief by looking for justice or setting up a charity etc.

The second thing is perseverance. I wonder if Jesus had Rizpah in mind when he told the story in Luke 18:1-8 about a judge who didn't obey God and didn't care what people thought of him. A widow kept coming to him looking for justice in her claim and he kept sending her away until, one day, he decided that the only way to get peace was to side with her and grant her request.

*Luke 18:6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.*

You see, we need more women, and men, like Rizpah, who see injustice and determine to do something about it.

In a moment we're going to sing a hymn that encourages us to remember that God is king and yet he is always with us. He always does what is right even if we don't understand what's going on. Our life of faith must start with acknowledging Jesus and continue in him.