

Who Was Rizpah and What Does Her Story Teach Us about the Importance of Grief?

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Back on the home front of all the [Bible](#) stories of revenge and murder is a mother mourning for her fallen son. She waited for him to return from the war against all odds. Then she suffers the horrible pain of losing a child. Rizpah of [2 Samuel 21:1-14](#) is one of the mothers who loses sons, two of them, as a result of ancient Israel's tribal conflict.

In Rizpah's case, her husband, King Saul, broke his promise that the Israelites would spare the Gibeonites in battle; he ordered the Israelites to annihilate them. To re-establish peace between the two tribes, David fulfills the Gibeonites' request to sacrifice two heirs of Israel's throne, Saul's sons and grandsons. Rizpah is the sad mother of the two sons of Saul who are sacrificed for tribal peace. Rizpah's love and piety—and David's joining Rizpah in a memorial and burial of the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan—move God to end a three-year drought and famine in the region.

Rizpah protects her sons' fallen bodies, which are displayed as trophies of the Gibeonites at Saul's former home in Gibeah. *"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 Sam 21:10](#)). [Rizpah's vigil](#) over her sons' bodies lasts from the spring harvest until the fall rains, five or six months. She protects them after their death, though she could not protect them from the Gibeonites or David in their lives.

Who Was Rizpah in the Bible, and What Do We Know about Her?

Rizpah is a widow, a former concubine of King Saul, the deceased king at the time of these biblical events. As a widow in ancient Israel, Rizpah has very little power. She cannot stop David from taking her sons and using them as a sacrifice to appease the Gibeonites. She is the daughter of Aiah, a descendant of one of Esau's wives ([1 Chronicles 1:40](#)). From this information you may gather she was one of the Israelites by birth. She is faithful to her extended family and her nation. She is also faithful to God. Rizpah is voiceless but acts on her beliefs. Perhaps most of all, Rizpah is a faithful mother to her two sons.

What Happened to Rizpah's Sons and Why Does She Grieve Them?

A famine that lasts three years leads David to ask the Lord why Israel is being punished by God. *"The Lord said, 'It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death'"* ([2 Samuel 21:1](#)). David seeks to appease God through better relations with the Gibeonites. When David asks what they want from him, the Gibeonites have the grisly request that seven of Saul's heirs are *"...killed and exposed before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul—the Lord's chosen one"* ([2 Samuel 21:6](#)). The dead bodies of seven of Saul's descendants are to be displayed at Saul's former residence at Gibeah. David agrees to the Gibeonites' request and gives the lives of two sons of Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth, and five of Saul's grandsons to the vengeful Gibeonites. These seven men are killed and their bodies are ceremoniously exposed during the first days of the barley harvest, a transition time in this agrarian society.

Rizpah, the mother of the sacrificed Armoni and Mephibosheth, guards her sons' bodies at the site where they are exposed. David follows her example of mourning by bringing the bones of Saul and Saul's son Jonathan to the Gibeonites' revenge memorial on Gibeah. Then David gathers up all of the dead men's bones and gives them a proper burial in a family tomb. And *"... After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land"* ([2 Samuel 21:14](#)). It rains and the drought ends.

Rizpah most likely experiences the loss of her sons as a greater loss than a prolonged drought or poor tribal relations. Like any mother, she probably wonders why her sons had to die. Like that of many women, her protest after her sons' deaths is silent. Her grief is displayed in her vigil, where her sons lay dead.

Why Is it Important for Christians to Embrace Grief?

Mary, the mother of Jesus, heard her son Jesus say from the cross before his death, *"Mother, behold your son"* ([John 19: 26](#)). The awful sight of Jesus on the cross was Mary's final vision of the son of God she bore by the Holy Spirit. Rizpah also had a

painful view of her sons' defiled bodies, exposed to the elements. I can't imagine losing a child, how profound that loss would be. I agree that it is not natural for a child to die before its parents.

Rizpah conducts herself in her grief with dignity, observing the ritual of a wake in watching over her son's bodies. Her example of grace in mourning leads David to gather the bones of Saul and Jonathan and honor them before burying all of the heirs to Israel's throne.

This biblical account of Rizpah burying her sons suggest that God wants us to observe the death of a loved one with grace and ceremony. It is good and wise to close the door on those we've lost before moving on to mourn further and reflect on what the experience with death has to give us.

At the conclusion of this Bible account of Rizpah's sad experience, God brings rain to dry land. The larger purpose of this human sacrifice was preserving Israel's survival against its enemies and the elements of nature. The kingdom of Israel moves on with Rizpah as one of its survivors. Rizpah's personal life is permanently damaged beyond words, however.

This Old Testament history episode suggests we can survive through huge losses and continue to walk in [faith](#)—that there is some lesson to be learned by cruel and sad outcomes. The peaceful message of Jesus in the New Testament works to heal the wounds of the battle-scarred people in the Old Testament. Through Jesus, God forgives us for all of the mistakes we've made and leads us to live as better people. Seeing Rizpah's vigil may have taught David and the Gibeonites how to mend their differences without further bloodshed. Tribes of the region and Israel engaged in many more battles after this time, however.

Why Should We Know about Rizpah Today?

Rizpah suffered for the sins of her husband and her nation. Attention to individual loss of a loved one sometimes brings about national repentance, just as it does in Rizpah's story. In modern times, national leaders have issued apologies to African Americans and Holocaust survivors. More apologies to groups of people whose lives were compromised due to a government's lack of action are due.

[The Jewish custom of guarding the dead](#) between the time of death and burial owes its tradition back to Rizpah. She is the "foremother" of the rite of *shmirah*, "guarding the soul of the deceased and helping usher them to another state of being, comforting the soul that is in pain and grief at the death of its body, or guarding the physical form from desecration." In Jewish burial tradition, the body is never left alone. Rizpah stayed the

duration with her boys' dead bodies. [Her presence](#) in their time between death and burial maintained the royal family and honored the dead with dignity.

As it says in the article "[Rizpah, Guardian of the Dead.](#)" "Rizpah is a model for us today as we see mothers fighting for the dignity of their children, for timely burial, and for the honor due to the lives these children lived. Mothers are joined by protesters who want a stop to the brutality teenage children suffered in death. The website [Mothers of the Movement for Black Lives](#) illustrates how the parents of young black men and women slain by police brutality mirror this legacy of Rizpah--who was a fierce protector of the dignity of her children and demanded the world witness what happened."

Lastly, we can remember that Rizpah's actions moved God's heart. Her faithful vigil helped bring an end to the drought and famine in the region. God was pleased with her. Rizpah is a Bible woman worth admiring as an example of godly care of her children.

The LORD is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit ([Psalm 34:18](#)).