

Introduction

- Good morning!
- Happy mother's day to all the mothers.
- I trust you've had a blessed week and that you will be well-spoiled today.
- Bev and I were well-spoiled this week — we finally managed, after a month in Canada, to pick up our new car!
- We are really looking forward to exploring our new home.

- One thing you may be interested to know about me is that with every message I preach, my goal is to learn something I did not know before and to convey that information as faithfully as possible.
- Because of this commitment, when the time came to prepare a message for mother's day, I did not want to go with some of the conventional characters. I wanted to go with a lesser-known mother.
- When I told Bev what I had chosen, she said, "You are going to preach on that? On Mother's Day?"
- I must warn you, the passage I have chosen for today is unconventional, if not a little jarring.
- But hang in there! It gets better in the end.

Body

- The mother I have chosen to share about is a lady by the name of Rizpah.
- Robert Bergen in the New American Commentary writes that “Rizpah represents perhaps the supreme expression of maternal loyalty in the bible.”
- While I agree with him, I am of the view that she represents far more than that.
- Let’s explore this fascinating woman together.
- Turn with me to [2 Samuel 21:1-14](#).

2 Samuel 21:1-14 ESV

¹ Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.” ² So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. ³ And David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?” ⁴ The Gibeonites said to him, “It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel.” And he said, “What do you say that I shall do for you?” ⁵ They said to the king, “The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, ⁶ let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD.” And the king said, “I will give them.”

⁷ But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul’s son Jonathan, because of the oath of the LORD that was between them, between David and Jonathan the

son of Saul. ⁸ The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; ⁹ and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

¹⁰ Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night. ¹¹ When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, ¹² David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. ¹³ And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged. ¹⁴ And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father. And they did all that the king commanded. And after that God responded to the plea for the land.

- When Israel suffered a famine for 3 years in succession, David assumed that this was not a natural disaster but a divinely motivated one. He decided to enquire of God.
- God confirms that the famine is due to the fact that Saul had broken a covenant that had been made between Israel and the Gibeonites.
- What was this covenant all about?

- When Joshua was invading Canaan and destroying its inhabitants, the Gibeonites, who inhabited the Canaanite city of Gibeon, understood themselves to be at risk.
- They dressed themselves in old, worn-out garb, and pretended to come from a distant land, offered themselves up as servants to Israel if they would agree to a peace treaty with them.
- Joshua and the Israelite leaders agreed.
- When Israel discovered the deception, Joshua declared that the Gibeonites were under a curse, enslaving them to serve as woodcutters and water carriers for the Israelite community.
- The Gibeonites expressed no complaint; they accepted this outcome gladly and this arrangement remained in place for generations.
- However, at some point during Saul's reign, Saul sought to put the Gibeonites to death.
- The biblical account does not explain why he wanted to do this, when it happened, how many Gibeonites were killed, whether this was an ongoing genocide or an isolated incident. All we know is what we can infer from this passage — that he killed some of them and that some of them survived.
- So, although they were servants to Israel, David called the Gibeonites together and asked them how expiation might be made.
- They respond by saying that because of their status, they were in no position to make demands for material compensation or to seek the death penalty.
- By mentioning this limitation, the Gibeonites were indicating that only a penalty in blood would satisfy them.

- David presses them, essentially saying, “While you may not be in a position to make demands, I am in a position to give you what you want. What shall I do for you?”
- At this point, they call for seven sons of Saul - probably a symbolic number - to be handed over to them for execution. David agrees, and sparing the son of Jonathan because of an oath, he handed over the two sons of Rizpah (Saul’s concubine), and the five sons of Merab (the daughter of Saul).
- The bible says that the Gibeonites hanged them on the mountain before the Lord.
- Now, a brief clarification needs to be made regarding this act of hanging.
- It is not suspension by rope, as they did in the Wild West.
- Ancient Near Eastern Texts attest to hanging as an impalement of a person on a sharp post. This impalement generally took place after the execution and was not usually the method of execution itself.
- This practice of shameful, public exposure was intended to deter people from breaking the law.
- It is at this point that Rizpah, the mother of two of the deceased, enters the scene.
- Seeing that the bodies of her wrongfully murdered sons were going to be left hanging in dishonour, she launched a silent protest against this injustice.
- She took sackcloth, spread it on a rock, and kept vigil over their bodies, protecting them from carnivorous birds and wild animals.
- She did this for somewhere between 5 and 6 months, from the beginning of barley harvest, which was in April, until the autumnal rains began, which was in October.

- Now, I would like for us to take a moment to consider this.
 - Here sits the concubine of Saul. This execution renders her childless. It destroys her legacy, her security, and her future.
 - If this loss is not enough, she subjects herself to an extended period of physical suffering.
 - She was exposed to the scorching summer sun during the day and deprived of sleep by night.
 - To guard the decomposing bodies against scavengers seeking carrion, she will only have been able to steal away for brief moments for sustenance.
- She sits there until it becomes so unbearable to watch that news of it gets to David.
- When David heard of this, he was convicted and motivated to gather up the bones of Saul, Jonathan, and the seven executed descendants and to honour them by giving them a proper burial.
- This action appears to have completed the atonement process that had begun with the executions.
- God responds to the plea for the land.
- Now, I do not know about you, but this passage makes me extremely uncomfortable.
- It is not just the injustice of what took place that makes me uncomfortable — it is that the passage is silent on how God feels about what happened.
- Was God merely satisfied that something had been done or was God pleased with what had been done?
- It so happens that scholars are divided on this point.

- Some argue that
 - The phrase “to be hanged before the Lord” suggests that this was a religious act that was carried out with the intention of pleasing God.
 - The penalty was consistent with Mosaic law in that it honoured the principle of life-for-life ([Ex 21:23](#); [Lev 24:21](#); [Deut 19:21](#); [Num 35:33](#)).
 - The fact that God relented and ended the famine with the sending of rain suggests that the atonement was acceptable to Him.
- Others argue that
 - God did not tell them to initiate the covenant in the first place.
 - God did not tell them how to make amends once it had been broken.
 - God simply required that amends be made. Thus, the blame for this injustice rests squarely on the shoulders of David and the Gibeonites.
 - Further, they argue that even if this act was performed on the basis of the principle of life-for-life, God could not have approved because they broke 2 other clear laws in the process:
 - Children were not to be put to death for the sins of their fathers ([Deut 24:16](#)).
 - A hanged man’s body was not to remain on the tree overnight but was to be buried the same day ([Deut 21:23](#)).
 - Surely God could not sanction a deed so opposite to His law.
- For me, the answer lies in taking a fresh look at Rizpah, and in particular, at what Rizpah is pointing to.
- You see, through her tragic act of love, she is not just keeping a vigil.
- She is taking on the role of a herald!

- In her silent protest against this injustice, she is signalling something far greater than her own tragedy.
- When I look at Rizpah, I see another mother witnessing another hanging of another son on another wooden post on another mountain, agonising over the unjust suffering and death of a Son.
- When I see Rizpah, I see Mary, and when I read this account, I see a radical prefiguring of Golgotha and all that took place there.
- If you can entertain the idea for a moment, let's consider these events in parallel.
- They are not the same:
 - The crucifixion at Golgotha was a cosmic event of infinitely greater significance.
 - That which took place in Gibeah was a tragedy, no doubt, but it is a mere reflection, a foreshadowing of that which was to come.
- But this mirroring is a helpful device for us to use as we work through the text.
- Let's consider these events side by side.
- Let's imagine the Father observing both of them.
- As we do, I would like for us to consider 3 questions:
 - (1) Was He pleased?
 - No!

- How could a Father be pleased with the brutal slaughtering of His only beloved Son? It was an impossibility!
- Not only was He not pleased, as the modern hymnist reminds us, the torment the Father experienced was so severe, He could not bear to watch!
- “How great the pain of searing loss. The Father turns His face away.”
- In this moment, the Father is able to identify with Rizpah — and every mother who has ever lost a child — in the most intimate way, because this is a loss that, in time, He will endure Himself.
- Just as He was not pleased with Golgotha, He was not pleased with Gibeah.
- This brings us to our second question.
- (2) Was He a passive observer?
 - No!
 - The same hymnist writes,
 - “How deep the Father’s love for us, how vast beyond all measure. That He should give His only Son, to make a wretch His treasure.”
 - As the Scriptures attest, “God so loved the world that He sent/gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”
 - Why do we not perish? Because He perished in our stead.
 - God, knowing this, sent Him anyway.
 - This is not a passive observer. This is an invested God.
 - Just as He acted in sending His Son to Golgotha, He acted in 2 Samuel by turning off the water!

- This brings us to our third question.
- (3) Was this even necessary?
 - Yes!
 - Why?
 - God takes covenant seriously, and because He takes covenant seriously
 - God takes sin, or the breaking of covenant seriously, and because he takes sin seriously
 - God takes atonement seriously, and because He takes atonement seriously
 - God takes restitution seriously.
- And we can work that backwards as well:
 - Because God takes restitution seriously,
 - God takes atonement seriously, and He takes atonement seriously because
 - God takes sin seriously, and he takes sin seriously because
 - God takes covenant seriously.

Conclusion

- My sense is that the rain that followed indicates divine mercy despite questionable means, not an explicit approval of how the atonement was made. That is, God could accept the outcome even though the method of execution was ethically problematic.

- When we read this account through a Christocentric lens, the problems go away because we see God not as a passive and unfeeling dictatorial judge but as someone with unwavering principles who must act to right the wrongs and who identifies with Rizpah because in time, He will subject Himself to a similar, yet exponentially greater agony as His own sinless Son performs the ultimate tragic act of love.
- It is tragic because He didn't deserve it.
- But thanks be to God that He did it anyway.
- Where would we be if He did not?
- Today, we honour mothers.
- In particular we honour a mother whose story points to Christ and paints a picture of the gospel in all its tragedy and all its glory.
- Mothers, my encouragement to you on this mothers day is that you would emulate Rizpah, that you would point your children, and all whom you encounter, to Christ.
- I find it fascinating that she was able to do that without uttering a word.
- And as we come to the table this morning, let us remember that we commemorate something of immense significance.
- Through this act of Holy Communion, we point back to the event that Rizpah pointed forward to.
- We partake as a celebration of the fact that God took sin and atonement so seriously that He sent His own Son to die in our stead, so that we may have eternal life.

Communion

1 Corinthians 11:23–28 ESV

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Prayer for the Body: Rene

Prayer for the Blood: Walter

Benediction

Hebrews 13:20–21 ESV

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.