

## The Daughters of Rizpah

2 Samuel 21:10-14

James A. Garfield's first act, after being inaugurated as President of the United States, was to bend and kiss her. Painter Benjamin West said that when he received a kiss from her, he determined to become a painter. Henry Ward Beecher declared that the memory of her was the brightest recollection of his early years. President McKinley provided in his will that, first of all, she should be made comfortable for life. Abraham Lincoln's opinion was that all he was or ever hoped to be, he owed to this woman. Erma Bombeck once wrote that she is completely washable, has 180 moveable parts (all replaceable), runs on black coffee and leftovers, and has a lap that disappears when she stands up. An unknown author has said that she can be almost any size or any age, but she won't admit to being older than thirty.

Who is this remarkable woman? She sounds like Supergirl, and she often acts like her. But she is someone we all know. Her name is "Mother." She is underpaid, has long hours and gets very little rest. The website Salary.com estimates that the work of a stay-at-home mother of three school-age children in the Utica, Mississippi area could be worth about \$133,000 a year (*Source: [www.mom.salary.com](http://www.mom.salary.com)*). This is as facilities manager, computer operator, logistics analyst, interior designer, plumber, bookkeeper, nutritionist, event planner, psychologist and janitor, among a hundred other things.

Today as we honor our mothers, we turn to an obscure story buried in the twenty-first chapter of 2 Samuel to read of a mother possessed with a remarkable love for her children. Her name was Rizpah, and our message today is entitled "*The Daughters of Rizpah*." It's the story of a mother who had no daughters herself, but all who follow her example today could be truthfully described as her daughters.

Centuries before the events of 2 Samuel 21, God told the Hebrew people that as they traveled through the land of Canaan they were to make treaties with no group of people who lived there. They were to conquer the land completely. The people in the city of Gibeon, however, deceived the Hebrews into making a treaty with them by making them think they had come a great distance, rather than just a few miles. That treaty had been honored and protected for centuries, until Saul became king in Israel. In his zeal for Israel, Saul began to exterminate any foreign people from his kingdom, and in so doing, broke the time-honored treaty with the Gibeonites.

In 2 Samuel 21, David was in the early years of his reign as king. A severe famine had been in the land for three years, so David sought the face of the Lord for a reason. The Lord's answer was that the famine had come because Saul had killed many of the Gibeonites. So David immediately summoned representatives of the surviving Gibeonites and asked them, "How shall I make amends to you for what Saul has done?"

It sounds cruel and heartless to us, but in that ancient culture there was only one way in which the Gibeonites could be avenged. They asked that seven of Saul's male descendants be given to them to be killed, and to add a further insult, their bodies were to be left unburied. David agreed. Two of Saul's sons and five grandsons were killed by the Gibeonites just as the barley harvest was beginning. Let's pick up and read verses 10-14:

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What a moving story this is! Imagine the scene of Rizpah maintaining a constant vigil over these seven bodies, fighting off the birds of the air by day and the wild animals by night. Let us think of the sacrifices made by this mother. If Rizpah worked this hard and long to protect the bodies of her dead children from further harm, how much more should today's mothers sacrifice to protect their living children? They've taken on different shapes and forms, but the birds are still hovering over our children today. The beasts are still prowling in the darkness, waiting for our fires to go out. We cannot watch over our children for their entire lives; there is always the danger of our being overprotective. But between their birth and the day they leave home, we have the solemn responsibility to watch over their spiritual welfare. What sacrifices must today's mothers make in order to protect the souls and minds of our children?

**1 To protect her children, today's mother must make a sacrifice of luxury.** We learn in chapter three of 2 Samuel that Rizpah was a concubine of King Saul. In the ancient Hebrew culture, a royal concubine was considered to be property which could be passed from one king to another. The concubines were given special privileges, because many of them were expensive investments. They were pampered and coddled, living in luxurious surroundings and served by many attendants. At a moment's notice any one of them could be sent for by the king, so they were groomed and preened constantly. You would never find one of the royal concubines scrubbing floors or tending the garden. Theirs was a life of luxury and ease.

Because she was royal property, Rizpah still enjoyed the privileges of living in the surroundings of the king's court. Hers had been a very easy life, which makes what we read in verse ten even more remarkable. In that verse, we read that Rizpah "*took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock.*" Some Bible scholars believe that Rizpah fashioned a sort of tent for herself, perhaps large enough to cover those seven decaying bodies as well. That was to be her home for the next several months as we will see later. Hardly the kind of accommodations to which she had been accustomed! No one there to wait on her every whim; no servants bustling about to tend to her needs. Just Rizpah, a rough piece of sackcloth to protect her and those bodies, the burning heat by day and the numbing chill by night.

If Rizpah gave up royal luxury to protect the bodies of her dead children, how much more should be sacrificed by today's mothers in order to protect living children! Most of today's mothers do not enjoy the kind of luxury found in a king's court, but there are other standards of luxury in our culture. We are made to feel that if we do not have this electronic device or that particular car, that we are paupers, nobodies who are missing out on the finer things in life. And much of the time we allow these material possessions to distract us from the main task we have as parents.

If somehow we could peer into the hearts of the mothers who are present this morning, we would be astonished at the kinds of sacrifices some women have made for their children. Many of the stories would thrill us; some would sadden us. It appears that you and I live in a day and in a culture which looks down on the woman who chooses to forgo many of the finer things in order to protect her children from the spiritual birds and beasts which hover and prowl around her children.

More than ever before, the Christian woman of today needs to stand strong against the influences of the world. She should be willing to sacrifice things for the sake of her children, because the task may very well demand it.

**2 To protect her children, today's mother must make a sacrifice of time.** Notice in verse ten the length of time Rizpah was there guarding the bodies of these seven young men: *"From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies..."* The reference to the harvest here is to the barley harvest, which occurred in late April or early May. In Palestine, rain does not normally fall from that time until mid- to late autumn, so that throughout the summer months there is no rain. If you will count them up, it appears that Rizpah kept her vigil over those bodies from five to six months. She literally sacrificed her time.

Think of all the things she could have been doing! She would certainly have mourned the deaths of her only sons, but no one would expect her to maintain her watch over these bodies for five or six months! But if Rizpah was willing to make this sacrifice of time to watch over these dead children, how much more should today's mothers sacrifice the time necessary to protect their children who are alive!

Think of the many things which devour the time available to us in our homes: ball practice and games, piano lessons, a second job, household chores, hobbies, television, school activities, to name only a few. Not to mention the various things in which any normal woman likes to be involved, many of which are healthy and good. The problem arises, however, when we cannot say "no" to just one more worthwhile project or committee assignment. We find ourselves

inundated with demands on our time, and sad to say, when that happens, it is the family which suffers first. It isn't that we mean to allow things to get out of hand, but it happens so gradually that we are unaware of it.

In today's economy, many families depend on that second income the wife brings in. Of necessity, the working mother finds that her time is split in a thousand different directions. It is then more important than ever that the time spent with the children be quality time, that it be guarded jealously. The vigil over our children becomes even more important.

There must be a balance here. Far too often do you see a mother so devoted to her children that she gives them all of her time, so that she has no time to herself. She becomes an extension of her family, existing only to meet their needs and desires. That is one extreme, and it is one to be avoided. No mother can give of her time wisely if she gives all of her time. She becomes spread too thinly, and is unable to give the guidance demanded of a mother. I believe deep in my heart that a mother's right relationship with Jesus Christ gives the proper balance that is so needed in today's family.

### **3 To protect her children, today's mother must make a sacrifice of energy**

You mothers of young children are probably chuckling to yourselves. To think that I, a man, should say that mothers need to sacrifice their energy! One young mother who was near exhaustion returned from a visit to her doctor. She told a neighbor of the instructions the physician had given her: "He said I needed to lie down for at least an hour and a half to two hours every afternoon. But I told him to do that I would have to get up at four o'clock every morning!" Erma Bombeck once wrote, "I don't expect anyone to fully appreciate that a mother makes more decisions in one morning than the Supreme Court makes in three years."

It is tempting to equate the sacrifice of energy with the exhausted feeling you have at the end of the day when you have just put the children to bed and you realize that the clothes are unfolded, the dishes unwashed, and tomorrow's lunches unmade! But take an intense look at the energy expended by Rizpah! Day and night, day and night, for five to six months, Rizpah gave of herself and her energy to see that these dead and decomposing bodies received no further harm. Imagine that scene! Imagine Rizpah scooping up a handful of small stones to fling at the hovering birds. Imagine this loving mother building a blazing fire to keep away the beasts at night. Imagine the dark circles so characteristic of escalating exhaustion forming under her eyes as she literally spent herself to protect these dead bodies!

How much more energy should today's mothers sacrifice in the protection of their children from the influences and worldly pressures of today's society? Christian mothers and fathers alike should be keeping vigil over the spiritual welfare of their children. In a spiritual sense, we should be tirelessly defending the souls and minds of our children from the pagan influence of our modern culture!

Rizpah's watch was something from which she could not rest. At the worst times of the day or night, if that mother relaxed even for a few minutes, the birds or wild animals would be there in a flash. Neither should we rest or let up from the ever-present battle. If we have been fooled into thinking that this is not a battle—a full-scale war—then we have just proved that we have already lowered our defenses, and our children are being carried off.

Again, there is an extreme at this point. If a mother—or a father—strives to make all the decisions for their children, so that the children never learn to spend their own spiritual energy in growing up, that mother or that father has done them just as much a disservice as if they hadn't guided them at all! And again, I believe that the proper balance here is only to be had as the mother—and the father—individually surrender themselves to the Lordship of Christ. His example is that He gave of His energy and His very life in going to the Cross, yet He allows us to make decisions on our own every day of our lives, that we might grow.

## **4 To protect her children, today's mother must make a sacrifice of reputation.**

What do we mean by that? Simply that today's mother must not be ultimately bound by what others will think. The bottom line is that each mother is responsible for her own children.

Think what must have happened to Rizpah's reputation! Certainly no mother in her right mind would do what she was doing! I can hear the neighborhood gossip now: "Poor Rizpah! The strain of watching Saul crack up finally got to her, didn't it? Her children being executed did her in. Poor, poor Rizpah!"

Certainly there were others who were not so kind. Some may have even gone out to where she kept watch, in order to mock her cruelly or throw stones at her. Some unkind souls may have considered that Rizpah was rendering herself unclean by associating with these dead bodies, and may have criticized her unmercifully. How could she hope to re-enter society with that kind of stigma attached to her?

Yet Rizpah paid them no mind. She knew what she must do, and neither the neighbors, nor the strangers who passed by, nor the self-righteous were going to distract her. She was literally sacrificing her reputation as a sensible, down-to-earth woman.

Mothers, if you are sincere about seeing to the needs of your living children, there are two things you must do. First, you must admit that you will not always be right—not even about your own children. Advice will be necessary occasionally. Second, you might as well prepare

yourself for the advice you are going to receive whether you ask for it or not. Some advice is good and sound, and you will welcome it as words of wisdom should be; some you will recognize under the leadership of the Holy Spirit as being unsound. Sure, people mean well, but you are the one responsible before God for the proper upbringing of your children.

When you do not follow the advice of others to the letter, you may be the target of some unjust and unkind criticism. Get ready for it—it is coming, if it hasn't already! But you must decide which is most important to you: the proper upbringing of your children before the Lord, or your reputation as a good mother.

The extreme at this point is that we grow to care less and less about what others think. That is not a healthy attitude towards life and other people, and certainly does not promote a vital Christian witness among the unsaved people of the world. We need a proper balance through a vital, living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we do care about what other people think, but we do not allow what they think become our final authority for deciding what to do.

The sacrifices of Rizpah did not go completely unnoticed. When the rains fell, indicating that God had once again blessed the land, the loving devotion of Rizpah was reported to King David. He promptly saw to it that the bodies, not only of the seven young men who died for the sins of Saul, but the bodies of Saul and his son Jonathan as well, were given decent, proper burials. If any mother will wholeheartedly surrender herself to the Lord Jesus Christ, and commit herself to whatever sacrifice is necessary to defend her children against all spiritual enemies—that woman will be remembered before the Lord, and she will be blessed.

Rizpah obviously loved her children and their five nephews. She loved them to such an extent that she sacrificed much to protect their lifeless and decomposing bodies from further harm. Her example challenges today's mothers these long centuries later to sacrifice whatever it takes to protect their living children from those things which would shackle them and pull them down, and prevent them from being all they should be in the eyes of God. Today's mother must make sacrifices of luxury, time, energy and reputation, if she is going to be more than the person who gives birth—if she is going to be a real mother.

One harried young mother wrote, "It was a busy day in our Costa Mesa, California, home. But then, with 6 children and one on the way, every day was a bit hectic. On this particular day, however, I was having trouble doing even routine chores -- all because of one little boy. Len, who was three at the time, was on my heels no matter where I went. Whenever I stopped to do something and turned back around, I would trip over him. Several times, I patiently suggested fun activities to keep him occupied. 'Wouldn't you like to play on the swing set?' I asked again.

“But he simply smiled an innocent smile and said, ‘Oh, that's all right Mommy. I'd rather be in here with you.’ Then he continued to bounce happily along behind me.

“After stepping on his toes for the fifth time, I began to lose my patience and insisted that he go outside and play with the other children. When I asked him why he was acting this way, he looked up at me with sweet green eyes and said, ‘Well, Mommy, in my Sunday School class my teacher told me to walk in Jesus' footsteps. But I can't see him, so I'm walking in yours.’”

When the deadly tornado came through Yazoo County on April 24, 2010, 31-year-old Nicole Carpenter sacrificed her life to save her three boys. It is a sad story, but she did what almost any mother would do if her children were in danger. We honor Nicole's memory and her sacrifice. At the same time, we each need to be reminded that there are other dangers waiting to take our children if we are not ever vigilant.

So today's hymn of decision is a call to each mother present today to recommit herself to the task of fighting off the birds and wild animals, whatever form they may take in our day, which try to destroy our children.

Yes! It demands sacrifice! Are you willing to make it?