

UNRAVELED

SEEKING GOD WHEN OUR PLANS FALL APART

What happens when our world falls apart? How do we press onward when our tightly-knit plans unravel into loose ends? What do we become when our identity—or the path we’re on—comes undone? What if all this is not the end we fear it will be?

In our unraveling, sometimes life surprises us with unexpected joy, love, and hope—with a new beginning we couldn’t have imagined. Sometimes we need God to unravel us, for we long to be changed. Throughout the summer we will explore biblical stories of unraveled shame, identity, fear, grief, dreams, and expectations. There are stories where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling our plans—and us—into something new.

2 Samuel 3:7; 21:1-14 – Rizpah Mourns Her Sons: Public Grief That Inspires Action



The story of Rizpah is unfamiliar to many of us, perhaps because it never appears in the Revised Common Lectionary and because it is a very disturbing story! It is set in a time of Israel’s history when there was great turmoil and transition. The great leaders like Moses, who led the Exodus, and Joshua, who led the settlement in Canaan, are gone. The movement from a collection of tribes ruled judges to a centralized monarchy under King David was long, hard, and often violent, involving threats from rival nations and from within Israel itself. Saul, the first legitimate king, has died and what amounts to a civil war ensues between David and the heirs and followers of Saul, and the most venerable members of their households, their wives and children, become tools in the conflict.

Rizpah is a concubine of Saul, better understood as a secondary or low-status wife. After Saul’s death, his army commander, Abner, outwardly supports Saul’s weak son, Ishbaal, as the next king, but also seeks to improve his own standing. Abner “goes in” and “takes” Rizpah, effectively claiming Saul’s power, but claiming his concubine. Angrily confronted by Ishbaal, Abner admits no crime against Rizpah, rather justifying his action by claiming he is only doing God’s will by delivering Saul’s kingdom to David.

When we hear of Rizpah again in ch. 21, David’s rule is more secure, but all is not well. There is a famine in the land, which has gone on for three years. King David prays to God who reveals that it is due to “bloodguilt on Saul” for violating a peace treaty by ordering the massacre of Gibeonite rivals. Rather than asking God what to do, David asks the Gibeonites, who ask that he hand over 7 of Saul’s sons for execution and David does. Two of them are Rizpah’s sons. Instead of receiving a proper burial, they are lynched on a mountain and left there to rot. In response, Rizpah publicly laments all their deaths, staying with the bodies at the top of the mountain for months, enduring the rainy season. When King David hears of Rizpah’s public display of grief, he is moved to delayed justice. He calls for the proper burial of the seven sons that he carelessly offered up to appease God. Justice in this scenario looks like sheltered, buried, dry bones. Rizpah’s public unraveling causes the unraveling of David’s distorted version of justice. God doesn’t require a human sacrifice for the end of the bloodguilt. God ends the famine when David sees Rizpah’s actions.

Guiding Questions:

- What has unraveled and/or is unraveling in this story?
- How do we grieve in the wake of unthinkable injustice and loss? Rizpah shows an honest, unapologetic grief and persistent strength in honoring the innocent lives of those taken from her. Think of a time when you have witnessed someone’s public display of grief. How did their actions affect you and others?
- What are some contemporary examples of public grief in the wake of appalling injustice? How does her public unraveling motivate the king to amend his wrongs? How might we be motivated by her?

Scripture for June 30, 2019 – Rizpah Mourns Her Sons

Matthew 7:21-29

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

²⁴“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

²⁸Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

2 Samuel 3:6-7; 21:1-14

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

While there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul. ⁶Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah daughter of Aiah. And Ishbaal said to Abner, “Why have you gone in to my father’s concubine?”

21 Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. The Lord said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.” ²So 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 tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.) ³David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?” ⁴The 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 anyone to death in Israel.” He said,

“What do you say that I should do for you?” ⁵They 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— ‘let seven of his sons be handed over to us, and we will impale them before the Lord at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord.’”^[a] The king said, “I will hand them over.”

⁷But the king spared Mephibosheth,^[b] the son of Saul’s son Jonathan, because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan son of Saul. ⁸The king took the two sons of Rizpah daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth;^[c] and the five sons of Merab^[d] daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite; ⁹he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they impaled them on the mountain before the Lord. The seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

¹⁰Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies^[e] by day, or the wild animals by night. ¹¹When David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, ¹²David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the people of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. ¹³He brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who had been impaled. ¹⁴They buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of his father Kish; they did all that the king commanded. After that, God heeded supplications for the land.

Footnotes:

- a. [2 Samuel 21:6](#) Cn Compare Gk and 21:9: Heb *at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord*
- b. [2 Samuel 21:7](#) Or *Merib-baal*: See 4.4 note
- c. [2 Samuel 21:8](#) Or *Merib-baal*: See 4.4 note
- d. [2 Samuel 21:8](#) Two Heb Mss Syr Compare Gk: MT *Michal*
- e. [2 Samuel 21:10](#) Heb *them*

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