

In Wake of Trauma, Victims and Counselors Ask, Can Any Good Come Out of Suffering?

The Wired Word for the Week of November 20, 2022

In the News

Last Sunday, authorities ordered students at two universities on opposite sides of the country to shelter in place, following reports of seven murders in separate incidents. Three University of Virginia football players were killed in gun violence, and the bodies of four University of Idaho students were found stabbed to death in a home near campus.

The suspect in the UVA murders, a fellow-student athlete, allegedly opened fire on the bus after attending a play with the victims. He was known to law enforcement and school officials due to previous scrapes with the law, school fighting and suspensions. He told an area news outlet in 2018 that his father's departure from the family when he was 5 years old was "one of the most traumatic things that happened to me."

Upon receiving notification from campus authorities to "RUN! HIDE! FIGHT!" on her phone, UVA junior Shannon Lake hid with friends and other students for 12 hours in a storage closet. "That was probably the most terrifying moment because it became more real to us, and reminded us of those practice school lockdowns as children," she said. "And it was just kind of a surreal moment where, you know, I don't think any of us were really processing what was going on. This will probably affect our campus for a very, very long time."

"In traumatic response," Shelly Rambo, a professor of theology at Boston University School of Theology, said, "there is a breakdown of multiple systems that we rely on to protect us from harm and to process harm. ... Trauma marks a 'new normal' in that there is no possibility of the person returning to who they were before. A radical break has occurred between the old self and the new one."

Researchers have learned that many traumatized people never return to their pre-trauma state. That's because they have seen and experienced horrors they cannot unsee and un-experience.

"I'm having a hard time coming to terms that this was happening," said Charlotte Goeb, another UVA student. Sophomore Em Gunter, concurred. "How do we deal with it afterwards?" she wondered. "What's it going to be like in a week, in a month?"

Charlottesville is still reeling from other recent tragedies, including the 2014 murder of a UVA student and the "Unite the Right" white supremacist event in 2017 that resulted in the death of a woman and dozens of injuries to others.

"The past isn't dead. It isn't even past," wrote the novelist, William Faulkner.

In [a recent article](#) about the presence of trauma in the Bible, Nate Brooks, a seminary counseling professor, wrote: "Our holy book is full of terribly unholy things. It is no stranger to the deep depths of human suffering, and this is a good thing. If the Bible did not capture the deepest, blackest, vilest sorrows that can befall people, we could not be certain that its true and precious promises apply to such situations."

Among the traumatic events found in the Bible, Brooks identifies sexual violence, infanticide and ethnic cleansing; other instances of trauma in our sacred text include war, slavery, treachery, family separation, natural disasters, displacement, poverty, atrocities, discrimination, the death of a child, abandonment, kidnapping, financial ruin, political upheaval, forced exile, and more.

Psychologist Ida Glaser defines trauma as "an experience that combines extreme danger with utter helplessness."

The fight/flight/freeze response to a threat is well known. Any of these responses may be appropriate in some circumstances, as they are deeply ingrained survival techniques. Victims of trauma may freeze, becoming numb or stuck any time they face a real or imagined threat that reminds them of a previous traumatic experience. Some who face an existential threat withdraw or flee, while others become combative and aggressive, which can make them a threat to others, for whom they may create new traumas.

Social trauma healers and conflict transformation activists, Dan and Sharon Buttry, point to a fourth response, which happens when people "transform the traumatic experience and move toward something constructive, perhaps even to reconciliation." It may be that it is "not only ... the trauma survivor who transforms, but also ... the offender who is transformed."

"Trauma is not a category of human experience that places someone outside of God's vision, God's care, and God's promises," Brooks asserts. "There is nothing we can do or nothing that can happen to us that places us beyond the horizon of God's help. ... We have a God who can bring life where there is none. We have a God who offers meaning and hope where there is none. We have a God who makes beauty from ashes."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Bible Keeps Record of Trauma. But Is It Trauma Informed? *Christianity Today*](#)
[Daughters of Rizpah: Nonviolence and the Transformation of Trauma. *Daniel L. Buttry and Sharon A. Buttry*](#)
["Putting Together the Pieces," Trauma Awareness Is Key Factor in Peacebuilding. *Center for Justice and Peacebuilding*](#)
["A Trauma Observed: Biblical Reflections on Safety, Control and Fragmentation," by Ida Glaser. *Tackling Trauma: Global, Biblical, and Pastoral Perspectives.*](#)
[Virginia Students Were Prepared for Shooting, Not Aftermath. *Associated Press*](#)

Applying the News Story

In common usage, "trauma" is typically defined as "a severe injury or a deeply distressing experience" -- in other words, the *event* that caused the ongoing related problems for the affected individual. In clinical jargon, however, trauma means "the *response* to a deeply distressing or injurious event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes one's sense of self and one's ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences."

The effects may last for an acute period and then subside, or they may last indefinitely and constitute a "new normal" for the affected individual.

"The past can haunt our future, [but we can find] resilience ... on the other side of trauma," Adam Frankel, author of *The Survivors: A Story of War, Inheritance, and Healing*, wrote. "Good ... can come from things that are unspeakably bad."

Our faith would point to the crucifixion of Christ as the ultimate illustration of that claim. That crime was unquestionably "unspeakably bad," and yet, God wrought salvation on the other side of the grave.

Psychologist Diane Langberg suggests that trauma is "the mission field of our time."

Jamie Aten, a disaster psychologist, who is also a survivor of Hurricane Katrina and of stage IV cancer, said that we best serve the traumatized by coming alongside them to help them "to endure and make redemptive meaning from adversity through their sacred connections with God, others and themselves."

For this lesson only, we will do a deep dive into a single narrative from the Bible, [2 Samuel 21:1-14](#), that describes a traumatic event and different responses to it. You may wish to prepare for your discussion by watching the series of brief videos found here: [Trauma Transformation](#).

The Big Questions

1. What biblical figures can you think of who experienced debilitating trauma? What was the nature of their trauma? How did they handle it? Where do you see God in their stories?
2. How is it possible to maintain faith in God when one has been traumatized?
3. Where have you found God in a traumatizing experience?
4. What actions and/or words on the part of others were most comforting to you when you have experienced trauma? What actions and/or words have been less helpful?
5. How can we talk about God in the face of wounds that won't go away?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

2 Samuel 21:1-6

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."

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 tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.) David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?"

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 anyone to death in Israel."

He said, "What do you say that I should do for you?"

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, 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."

The king said, "I will hand them over."

This chapter tells the story of how David tried to solve the problem of his people's famine, which had gone on for three years. He prayed, and God told him that Israel had shed innocent blood when Saul (the previous king) had massacred Gibeonites (an ethnic minority group who had become servants of the Israelites precisely because they were afraid they would be slaughtered if they didn't find a way to make peace with Israel).

When the Israelites entered Canaan, the Gibeonites negotiated a peace treaty with Joshua (that story is told in [Joshua 9](#)). Even though the Gibeonites had tricked Joshua into making this pact with them, he and the leaders of the people kept their oath to keep them alive. In return, they required that the Gibeonites become woodcutters and carriers of water for the house of the Lord.

The peace between the Israelites and the Gibeonites held for over 400 years, throughout the period of the judges, until Saul became Israel's first king. Joshua had even protected the large city of Gibeon when it was attacked by the armies of five kings allied against it ([Joshua 10:1-11](#)).

God advocated for the Gibeonites when the Israelites, God's chosen people, acted unjustly and broke their covenant with them.

Once David understood that the House of Saul had tried to exterminate the Gibeonites, in violation of their peace treaty, he met with survivors to ask what justice would look like for them. They weren't interested in financial compensation, nor did they have the authority to punish anyone for the atrocities that had been committed against their people. If they had taken revenge on their own, they would surely have unleashed even more wrath and violence against their community. They needed David to take responsibility for any punishment that would be meted out.

Surely the crimes that were committed against the Gibeonites amounted to more than seven murders. Perhaps David thought that they weren't really asking for much. Compared to the losses they had sustained, the seven sons of Saul the Gibeonites wanted killed didn't seem like such a

high price to pay, to put the past behind them and end the famine! They were requesting much less than ["life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."](#)

Unless those sons happened to be your sons!

These young men or boys were probably too young to have been the same relatives or allies of Saul who had committed the atrocities against the Gibeonites. They were more innocent victims, condemned, just as the Gibeonites had been, only because they happened to be born into the wrong family.

It doesn't appear that David ever asked the Lord how to make things right for the Gibeonites, or that he ever asked God what he thought of their request. He even agreed to allow the murders to be conducted "on the mountain before the LORD" as an act of worship, which would have given people the impression that the killings were sanctioned by God himself.

Questions: What did the Gibeonites do in response to their trauma experience? What feelings do you imagine must have been part of their response? What was the result of their response to trauma? Was there any response of God that followed what they did? What might that indicate?

2 Samuel 21:7-9

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 son of Saul. The king took the two sons of Rizpah daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite; he 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.

Two of the young men or boys who were selected to be "sacrificed" were sons of Saul, by Rizpah, and five were his grandsons, by Saul's daughter Merab. As women, they were powerless to stop the barbarity. The loss of their sons would have also meant the loss of all security and livelihood. Widowed and without sons to care for them in their old age, the future must have looked bleak indeed!

There is no mention of Merab after this passage. We are not told how she reacts or what she does in response to this devastating event. She fades from view, and we never hear from her.

Questions: Imagine yourself at the scene of the apprehension and murder of the seven sons. (Alternatively, if time allows, ask for volunteers to roleplay characters at the event.) Who is present at the scene? Why are they there? What is their reaction to what they are witnessing?

Now focus on Merab. What did she do in response to her trauma experience? What feelings do you imagine must have been part of her response? Roleplay a news reporter's interview with Merab at the scene of the slaughter. Will she talk? If not, why not? What is hidden in her silence? What was the result of her response to her trauma?

2 Samuel 21:10

Then 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 by day or the wild animals by night.

As a concubine, Rizpah was in a particularly vulnerable position, as [2 Samuel 3:1, 6-8](#) demonstrates. In that passage, Ishbaal, king of most of the tribes his father Saul had ruled, accused his military commander, Abner, of having sexual relations with Rizpah. Abner denied it, but the statement is in the context of Abner "making himself strong in the house of Saul." Having sex with one of Saul's concubines, with or without her consent, would have been a power play showing Abner's strength in contrast to Ishbaal's weakness.

So Rizpah was not only the widow of a defeated king, effectively a single mother raising two orphaned boys, but she couldn't protect herself from becoming a political pawn, a rape victim, a sexual object to be used and discarded. Add to that humiliation the trauma of the brutal slaying of her sons!

Unlike Merab, Rizpah refuses to be silent. Single handedly, she takes action to prevent the king's edict from being fully carried out. Although she could not prevent the murder of her sons and nephews, she was not about to allow their bodies to be further desecrated and dishonored. For months, she stands vigil as the sun beats down on their broken bodies, fighting off scavenger birds and wild beasts looking for a quick meal.

Questions: Now focus on Rizpah. You might have a volunteer pantomime her actions at the scene. What did Rizpah do in response to her trauma experience? What feelings do you imagine must have been part of her response? Why did she do what she did?

In what sense was her response an act of defiance or civil disobedience? What was the result of her response to her trauma?

What gave Rizpah the strength she needed to resist injustice even though she could not bring her sons back from the dead?

There is sometimes talk about Christians being "wounded healers." In what sense does Rizpah fit this description?

2 Samuel 21:11-14

When David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, David 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. He 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. They 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.

Even though Rizpah was severely traumatized, and perhaps the weakest and most marginalized person in this narrative, she is the one who transforms this horror story into one of healing and restoration.

When David hears about Rizpah's brave act, he is moved to take action himself. But instead of approaching her immediately, he goes first to Jabesh-gilead, to exhume and retrieve the bones of Rizpah's husband and Merab's father Saul, and those of Saul's sons, including that of Jonathan, David's best friend, who had been killed in battle with the Philistines. After they died, the Philistines had desecrated their bodies and nailed their bodies to the wall of Beth-shan. The men of Jabesh-gilead risked their lives to recover and cremate the bodies, burying them in a temporary grave because the land was still embroiled in civil war as the people fought over who should rule in Saul's stead ([1 Samuel 31:8-13](#)).

Questions: Now concentrate on David. How had he been traumatized by events of the previous years? What feelings do you suppose he had during the gathering and burial of bones? Why were the bones David brought to Rizpah an appropriate gift and effective peace offering?

What is the significance of the actions David took in response to what Rizpah had done? What is the significance of the fact that David and Rizpah performed this act of memorial together? What are some ways a traumatized community may grieve together, potentially leading to some measure of catharsis and healing?

How did God respond to their action? Why didn't God heed the supplications for the land before they took this action?

For Further Discussion

1. Consider this, from Nate Brooks, a seminary counseling professor: "Put yourself in the shoes of someone whose youth pastor groomed them, exploited them, blamed them, and threatened them. What is it like for them to put their own children in youth group? Or imagine a veteran who tends to feel a strong sense of threat when surrounded by loud noises. What's it like for them when the congregation belts out the chorus of a hymn with gusto?"

"God has much to say [regarding] both situations through his Word. And his Word could also be used in a way that bypasses the actual struggle within each person's experience. Words like 'Love believes all things' or 'Don't forsake the gathering together' are certainly true; yet the damage done by past trauma creates a wake that makes these straightforward principles much choppier in application. Being trauma-informed doesn't mean that God's Word is somehow superseded by life's struggles; instead, it means that those life struggles are deeply relevant to the process of discipleship."

2. To the extent that you feel comfortable discussing it, what wounds do you have that provide strength when you are working with others? Are there wounds that seem to hinder you in ministering in Christ's name? In what sense is Jesus a wounded healer?

3. When asked how local church communities and church leaders can best care for those who have been wounded by trauma, [Hermeisha Hopson](#), director of Refuge Counseling and

Consulting Services in Jacksonville, North Carolina, responded: "If you're a church leader and someone who has been harmed comes to you, respond by saying, 'I believe you,' or 'It took a lot of courage for you to tell me that, and I'm grateful for that.' It's important to meet the person where they're at by not dismissing, shaming and minimizing their pain just because it makes you uncomfortable. Our words have power to give life or death, to hinder or help."

What do you think of Hopson's advice? Is there anything you would add or subtract?

4. How does [this comment](#) relate to the Rizpah story? "My past trauma and upbringing can't be excuses for my bad behavior. I have to be the one to break the cycle."

Responding to the News

You may wish to sing the modern hymn, ["This Is a Day of New Beginnings" \(Video with Lyrics 1:44\)](#) together as you reflect on how God is present with us to sustain us in trauma and transform us by his grace. [Printed version available here.](#)

Prayer

O God, when we experience trauma at the hands of others, help us, even as we lament, to find a way to transform our pain into justice, purpose and affirmation of our worth in your eyes. Keep us from turning our pain into vengeful acts of aggression that only add to the trauma in the world. When we dehumanize our enemies and seek to portray ourselves as "holier than them" to justify our own sin, forgive us, and turn us from the downward spiral of retribution. Heal our brokenness and show us how the traumatized and the traumatizer can be transformed by walking together with you through the valley of the shadow of the cross of Christ. Amen.