

OUR SHENANDOAH MOMENT
A Devotional Meditation from
Exodus 1:8-10; 1 Samuel 23:15-18; 2 Samuel 2:8-11, 3:6-21;
1 Kings 2:5-6; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Romans 12:14-13:15; Ephesians 6:10-19
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Scene from *Shenandoah*, 1965 film starring James Stewart. [Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com.](https://www.heritageauctions.com)

The first movie I remember about the American Civil War is *Shenandoah*, a 1965 drama starring James Stewart as Charlie Anderson, a farmer in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. As a law-abiding Christian, he desires only to live in peace with his neighbors. That was hard to do in the 1860s, when the Shenandoah became a region of active military operations. Charlie tries to stay out of the war, but inevitably the war comes to him when Union troops mistake his youngest son as a Confederate soldier and take him prisoner. He then embarks on a quest to find his son – a quest fraught with tremendous tragedy for his entire family. They cannot escape the conflict unscathed, and many do

not come through alive, yet at the end Charlie's remaining sons and daughters are reunited in a way that gives us hope for their future.

This story took on greater significance as I learned my own family's story. The Civil War was, for us, quite literally a war of brother against brother and father against son. My great-great-grandfather, a native of New York, had come to Alabama to start a new life. He opposed Alabama's secession from the Union, and before long became caught up in the guerilla war that raged across North Alabama and East Tennessee. In 1864, he learned that his stepson, my great-grandfather Josiah, had joined the Confederate Army. Josiah was only 15 at the time, but he had good reason to go to war: Yankee raiders had devastated his county, and he enlisted to drive back the invader. Eventually, the two of them met on the field of battle at Atlanta. Both survived the encounter, but Josiah was grievously wounded and lived as an invalid for the rest of his life.

What are we to learn from such stories? Who was right – the one who sought to remain out of the fight, or the ones who chose sides?

But then, how are we in a position to judge? Each man did what was right according to what he knew. Abraham Lincoln understood this. In his Second Inaugural Address, he summarized the anguish of a godly people so divided over irreconcilable issues. Said Lincoln:

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph

and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him. Fondly do we hope ~ fervently do we pray ~ that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

Judgment did come on the United States for many injustices, particularly slavery. What we do not like to think about is that the instruments of judgment were God's people themselves. Godly people led both armies, filled the ranks, tended the sick and wounded, kept them supplied, and sent their sons off to war against one another. Were any of them wrong to do what they did?

Maybe that's not the right question. We might learn a better question if we consider the sojourn of Israel in Egypt, when a new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph, the ruler who brought the Hebrews into the land and ensured great favor for them. How many Hebrews fought against this new dynasty, knowing it would enslave and oppress them? How many worked to bring it into power? How many had no preference, or even no clue what was happening? And who was right? All were affected, and all had to be so that God could bring about His purposes of creating a people for Himself.

God sometimes designates agents to preserve the old order so that it may survive long enough and create the conditions for His new work to mature. We can see this in the careers of Saul's son, Jonathan, and his general, Abner. They fought to preserve Saul's kingdom, even though they knew that in time David would be king. When that time came, Abner led all Israel in accepting David's rule. On the other hand, David's general, Joab, fought to bring David to the throne. Yet in doing so, he committed great crimes – even killing Abner in cold blood.

David honored Abner, his enemy, but spoke condemnation on his friend and lifelong ally, Joab. Who, then was right? Again, we cannot say; only God is judge.

There are those who say we must always obey those in authority over us, as Paul advised –

Let every person submit himself to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are put in place by God. So

whoever opposes the authority has resisted God's direction, and those who have resisted will bring judgment on themselves. For leaders cause no fear for good behavior, but for bad. Now if you do not want to fear the authority, do what is good and you will get his approval—for he is God's servant to you for your good. But if you do evil, be afraid—for he does not carry the sword for no reason; for he is God's servant, an avenger who inflicts punishment on the evildoer. Therefore it is necessary to be in submission—not only because of punishment but also because of conscience. (Romans 13:1-5 TLV)

Then there are those who say we should resist lawlessness whenever we are able. They, too, point to Paul –

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you are able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the worldly forces of this darkness, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist when the times are evil, and after you have done everything, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:10-13 TLV)

Perhaps our answer is not in Paul, but in Solomon –

For everything there is a season and a time for every activity under heaven:
a time to give birth and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted;
a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build up;
a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance;
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to discard;
a time to tear apart and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak;
a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 TLV)

The question is not whether to choose a side or sit by, but when to do which, according to our circumstances and callings. Whatever we do, let God be glorified, and let us be ready to heal, mend, and rebuild as we work together toward the next stage of His Kingdom's coming.