

I MAY HAVE BEEN THAT GUY

A Devotional Meditation on Pinchas (Phineas)

Numbers 25:10-29:40; Jeremiah 1:1-2:3; Isaiah 42:1-4;

Matthew 12:15:21; Galatians 3:23-29

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A friend of mine once shared how his views on the role of women changed thanks to his relationship with his wife. As he said, “You know that guy who thinks a woman’s place is in the home? The one who believes women should be barefoot and pregnant and in the kitchen? Well, I may or may not have been that guy.”

My friend broke into a sheepish grin and his face turned red as he made this confession. Having been through a similar transformation, I understand what he experienced. We both had been raised in conservative Christian



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homes which honored the traditional roles of men and women. Men were the heads of the household, at least in theory, although we both had seen our mothers exercise considerable power, both inside and outside the home, as co-leaders with our fathers. They were strong, capable women, and our fathers recognized that. As children, we also recognized the capabilities of our mothers, and the vibrant partnerships they had forged with our fathers, but it wasn’t until we had gone out into the world on our own that we gained a better understanding.

I must also confess that I “may or may not have been that guy” who believed women should always be under men’s authority, and that their roles in the workplace and in church should be limited. It’s the strong, capable women in my life who helped me understand differently. My mother, sister, grandmother, and aunts started the process. Their spheres of influence extended into the community and the workplace. My grandmother, in fact, was among the women who went into the factories during World War II to do jobs previously done by the men who were away at war. Then there is my wife, who helped me understand that male authority in the home did not mean I could have my way at all times in all things. Marriage and parenting require a partnership of two responsible people, not a dictatorship of one over the other.

It also helped that my career field in the Army was equally balanced between men and women. At any given time, I could have women as my superiors, peers, and subordinates. After a while, I began to wonder why women in the Army could be high-ranking officers and high-powered sergeants wielding enormous responsibility, but women in the church (at least in my denomination) could not be pastors. Eventually, I concluded that much of the limitation on women’s roles was due to culture rather than scriptural principles.

This is not an indictment of any denomination. I have a larger point in view, and the role of women serves as a good place to make that point. The story about Zelophehad's daughters introduces the subject. These five women approached Moses about a matter of injustice that the Torah did not address:

[They] stood before Moses, Eleazar the *kohen* [priest] and the princes of the entire assembly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and said, "Our father died in the wilderness. But he was not one of the followers banding together against *ADONAI* with Korah, though he died for his own sin. Yet he had no sons. Why should our father's name diminish from his family just because he had no son? Give to us property among our father's brothers."

So Moses brought their issue before *ADONAI*, and *ADONAI* spoke to Moses saying, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in saying you should give them property by inheritance among their father's relatives. You are to turn over the inheritance of their father to them. Furthermore, you are to speak to *Bnei-Yisrael* [children of Israel] saying: If a man dies without a son, you are to transfer his inheritance to his daughter. If he has no daughter, you are to give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, you are to give it to his father's brothers. If his father had no brothers, you are to give it to the nearest relative in his family that he might possess it. This is to be a legal statute for *Bnei-Yisrael*, just as *ADONAI* commanded to Moses."

Numbers 27:2-11 TLV

Some people might see this as an example of how the Torah reinforces patriarchal structures that undermine women's rights and relegate them to subordinate positions. Could it be, however, that the Torah as God gave it to Moses 3,500 years ago included provisions to regulate what had become patriarchal overreach in the Ancient Near East? Is it possible that God had a concept of how men and women should interact that transcended cultural norms, but the Hebrews and other peoples at the time were unable to accept His ways? If so, then perhaps God gave the Torah with the intent that it give Israel a picture of His ideal social structures, and shepherd them so they could mature individually and as a society in the direction of that ideal.

It seems Paul had something like this in mind in his letter to the Galatians:

Now before faith came, we were being guarded under *Torah*—bound together until the coming faith would be revealed. Therefore the *Torah* became our guardian to lead us to Messiah, so that we might be made right based on trusting. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. For you are all sons of God through trusting in Messiah *Yeshua*. For all of you who were immersed in Messiah have clothed yourselves with Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for you are all one in Messiah *Yeshua*. And if you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham's seed—heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:23-29 TLV

It's this line of reasoning that explains why we study the entire Word of God, especially the Torah, which contains the principles by which God's universe operates. It takes a while to understand those principles, and sometimes even longer to begin living by them.

That's because living by God's standards requires us to make changes in our thoughts, words, and actions, both as individuals and as communities.

That's what we see in the story of Zelophehad's daughters. They were the ones who first saw that something wasn't right, and that if nothing changed, they and their father's family would suffer great loss. It took courage for them to speak out, first to their clan and tribal leaders, and then to Moses and the entire leadership of the nation. The fact that they were heard is testimony that Israel was ready to make the necessary changes to make things right. At other points in Israel's history, these women might not even have received an audience beyond their local elders. However, on the eve of Israel's entry into the Promised Land, the nation was ready to take up the weighty matter of a change to the Law.

God Himself had to authorize such a change, which is why Moses took the matter to Him. As ready as Israel was to take this step of collective maturity, their Redeemer was even more eager for them to do so. It was the first of many such negotiations with the Almighty as His people discovered issues that required clarification.

The process continues to this day. If He chose, our Creator could make the necessary corrections immediately, but that would cause tremendous suffering. That's why He waits for us to come to our collective senses and ask for His help. Until then, we labor along like a crushed reed or a smoldering wick, hoping that our God will not break us or snuff us out. It's a very serious matter because it involves learning justice and mercy on God's terms. It's only when we have matured beyond our childish understanding that we can sheepishly admit, "I may or may not have been that guy."