

NAVIGATING OUR SHENANDOAH MOMENT

A Devotional Meditation on Shemot (Names)

Exodus 1:1-6:1; Isaiah 27:6-28:13, 29:22-23;
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Romans 12:14-13:15; Ephesians 6:10-19

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The first movie I remember about the American Civil War is *Shenandoah*. In that 1965 drama, James Stewart plays the role of Charlie Anderson, a farmer in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. As a law-abiding Christian, Charlie desires to live at peace with his neighbors. He 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. Charlie then embarks on a quest to find his son. His family 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.



Statue of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC.
Photo: [National Park Service/Terry Adams](#).

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 grievously divided over irreconcilable issues, noting how God's hand of judgment had come on the United States for many injustices, particularly slavery. *

We don't like to think about God's judgment. It's uncomfortable, especially when we realize that the instruments of judgment are often God's people themselves. In the American Civil War, godly people led both armies, filled the ranks, tended the sick and

* The text of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is available at the Lincoln Memorial website, <https://www.nps.gov/linc/learn/historyculture/lincoln-second-inaugural.htm>.

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. Things had changed significantly since the time Joseph opened the way for his Hebrew family to live in the best part of Egypt. When the new dynasty arose, how many Hebrews fought against it, knowing the new rulers would enslave and oppress them? How many worked to bring the new regime 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 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 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:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 TLV

The question is not whether to choose a side or sit by, but when to do which, according to our circumstances and callings. The Shenandoah moments will come, and we will be required to choose wisely. Our God, the same God Who has always looked after the Hebrews, is still creating a people for Himself. At some point, probably very soon, He will be calling His people out of the kingdoms of this world just as He called Israel out of Egypt long ago. In the process, some will be fighting to preserve and restore the old ways, others will be fighting to establish the new ways, and some will simply be trying to stay out of the way. All of us will be affected, as it must be so that God can bring about His purposes of creating a people for Himself. 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. That is how we navigate our Shenandoah Moment.