

AGENTS OF RIGHTEOUS CHANGE

A Devotional Meditation on Shoftim (Judges)

Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9; Isaiah 51:12-53:12;
1 Kings 3:16-28; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 8:1-11

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There is an annoying exchange in the Gospels where Yeshua's followers tell Him about a problem beyond their means, and He tells them to fix it. It's the story of Yeshua feeding the five thousand. Luke tells it this way:

Now the day began to wind down, and the twelve came and said to *Yeshua*, "Send the crowd away, so they might go into the nearby villages and countryside and find food and lodging; for we are in a desolate place here." But *Yeshua* said to them, "You give them something to eat!"

Luke 9:12-13 TLV

Mark adds that the disciples then complained about resourcing priorities, asking, "Should we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread to give them something to eat?" (Mark 6:37 TLV)

Before we start thinking how we would act differently and somehow better than the disciples, we should think about the times we approached the end of the month and wondered how we could stretch three eggs, half a loaf of bread, and a can of beans until payday. Or maybe we should remember how we complained in prayer about the ungodly curriculum promoted in our schools. We might even want to consider our anger at the poor choices of political candidates set before us.

God should be our first resort in every matter, whether it's a deadly disease, a broken relationship, a prodigal child, or a tedious job. It's better to inquire of God before setting out to fix the problem in our own strength and wisdom. However, as we inquire, we should expect Him to require some action on our part. That might mean following the doctor's orders, or seeking employment elsewhere, or being the first one to apologize. It might also mean volunteering to lead a committee for the school or church, or running for the school board – or perhaps getting involved in someone else's political campaign. It could mean starting something that will take years to complete, such as going back to school to become a lawyer, or starting a business with the intent of earning enough money to make a difference in people's lives.

These are the kinds of actions God might require of us as we ask Him to intervene. Much as we might prefer to have Him wave his hand and make our problems go away, the wave of His hand often is a gesture for us to get involved and be the solution He has intended all along.



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This is the difference between seeking salvation to have an easy life, and seeking redemption to become what God created us to be. Our Creator wants active agents who can assess each situation, make hard decisions based on our understanding of His ways, and follow through with decisive action that at least brings the situation closer to God's desired outcome. Sometimes that means taking an extra five minutes to clean up a mess in the kitchen, but sometimes it means years, or generations, of dedicated effort to the vision God has imparted. Always, it means doing this in a broken world where few people have a biblical world view. It means compromising to move the process along while never compromising on God's standards of righteousness.

Others won't always understand why we do what we do, and that's why we must be sure we have God's counsel – especially when the criticisms come from well-meaning, but highly offended, fellow believers. We have an example in the way Yeshua dealt with the woman caught in adultery. Her accusers were right to seek justice. She had sinned grievously with another woman's husband. Yeshua knew that, but He also knew that the angry, self-righteous men who brought her to Him were guilty of the same or worse sins. His decisive response upheld due process of God's Law, prevented a lynching, and appealed to the consciences of the woman's accusers, while imparting redemption and restoration to a repentant sinner.

Another son of David took similar decisive action in a very hard case. Solomon's first test as king was to judge between two prostitutes who claimed custody over the same child. Why were there prostitutes in God's Covenant nation of Israel when He specified that such sexual misconduct should be eradicated? Were the women cult prostitutes who earned their living in a pagan temple? If so, why didn't the king execute them and destroy the shrine to the foreign god?

That might have been the answer had there not been an innocent life involved. The infant over which the two women were fighting, and the other infant in the story who had died by his mother's neglect, had no choice in the circumstances of their birth. It was bad enough that the surviving child was to grow up without a father. What would be the benefit of having him grow up as an orphan, if he were allowed to grow up at all?

Solomon's famous decision is subject to criticism. His call for a sword to divide the child and give half to each woman brings the question of whether the king would actually have carried out such a decree. Surely God would not sanction the deliberate slaughter of an innocent child simply to bring an end to a civil matter caused by his mother's choice of livelihood. But then, was it her choice? Had she and the other woman been sold into prostitution by their fathers? Were they forced into it because their husbands had died or abandoned them? Where was the social support system to prevent such things? Was there no ancient Israelite equivalent of a Department of Social Services to whom Solomon could refer the matter?

We are not accustomed to thinking about Bible stories in these ways, but why should we expect that human relations were any different 3,000 years ago? There is nothing new under the sun, as Solomon tells us. The king had to hear the matter because no one else could bring closure to the case. His assessment of the situation included a keen understanding of human nature, and therefore he took the calculated risk that the mother of the child would reveal herself before any harm could be done.

But is that what God really wanted?

This is where it gets really hard, because we know that the murky situation with these women, as with the adulterous woman brought to Yeshua, are more the rule than the exception. We have to decide between compromised candidates in elections, and between competing factions with less-than-pure motives. We can't expect God to wave His hand and clear away the unrighteousness immediately, because doing so would mean the destruction of every person on earth. What we can expect Him to do is guide us in the process of self-government over our own hearts, our families, our congregations, our communities, and our nations. The way will be messy and full of compromises. There will be setbacks and failures, and there will always be those who criticize us from a position of misplaced zeal. Yet the alternative is worse. If we take no action, then wicked people of action will have their way, and everyone will suffer.

What God wants is for all His people to know Him and His word so we can practice justice righteously. That's how we prepare ourselves for His Kingdom, and prepare the way for our King.