Heroes of the Faith Series

Faith in tough Work Places:

Obadiah

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Heroes of the Faith:
Faith and Work
Obadiah: 1 Kings 18

Obadiah – and you: Integrating Faith and Work

Obadiah? You can hardly call him a hero of the faith can you? I mean, all he did was to bring sandwiches and thermoses to one hundred of the Lord's prophets who were holed up in what they sincerely hoped were Ahab-proof caves.

What do you mean is that all he did? Obadiah did what he could – rather like that wonderful woman we read of in the New Testament who we all remember today, (Mark 14:8) even though she too raised no dead, healed no sick nor even cast out a juicy demon or two. (Rather like most of us come to think of it)! But Obadiah is of particular interest to us because of where he served: in Ahab's court.

Thanks to the wholesale changes that Queen Jezebel had instituted in setting up the prophets of Baal, this would be rather like a Christian serving in Mecca, but still popping out from time to time to service the suffering saints of God.

Obadiah comes across as a somewhat fearful character. Elijah charges him to take a message to his master. Only trouble was: there was a hefty price on Elijah's head. He was right bang at the top of the king's most wanted saints for the slaughter list, which means that even mentioning his name in court is a risky business. From this safe distance in history, Ahab and Jezebel may sound a bit like the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland, forever condemning some innocent passer by with the words, 'Off with his head.'

There was nothing humorous about the murderous regime they set up, however. The whole cause of God's cause on earth was in jeopardy from their deadly attack. Every Jezebel needs an Ahab, a weak-willed person (usually in a leadership position) through whom the strong one can impose their will. The chemistry between this married pair created just the right conditions for evil to flourish.

Time and again in Scripture we marvel at how much depends on seemingly flimsy threads. If Rahab hadn't protected the spies who entered the Promised Land . . . or Ruth had lacked the courage to accompany Naomi to the Promised Land . . .or Saul had succeeded in killing Saul, as it seemed at times he was all but certain to do . . . the list is endless and the consequences don't bear thinking about.

The Lord used this servant of the Lord – for that is what Obadiah's name means) to shelter this large group of prophets. (We won't inquire too deeply how he managed to acquire and account for the extra food and water they must have consumed during this profound drought!)

Obadiah was understandably keen that Elijah should recognise the role that he had played. All of us thrive when people notice our contribution – and we risk shrivelling when they do not. Understandably, he extracted from Elijah the promise that he would present himself to the king that very day. You can never be too careful with prophets: they have a habit of appearing and then disappearing again – even when they do not have a Wanted Notice out for them! To his credit he overcame his fears and played a vital role as the messenger who brought Elijah back in touch with his arch foe: King Ahab.

Deep down, Ahab was as fascinated by this remarkable prophet of God as Herod was of John the Baptist. This time Elijah would not be led by the Spirit to run away and hide, but rather to provoke the greatest spiritual crunch crisis of all time.

Those who serve in public places

In this article we are thinking about people who serve the Lord in highly public forums. The first thing to say is that God goes to great lengths to get them to the positions that they now occupy. The fact that they have made it to some influential position, however, does not mean that they will have an easy time of it. For a start they may have to cope with much 'sniping' from other believers.

There were always people willing to write to people like Cliff Richard and say, 'why don't you do it properly now that you've become a Christian, give up this pop music and become a vicar!' But God had gone to enormous lengths to make Cliff Richard not a vicar

but a successful pop star, who was also enormously skilful at communicating his faith to others. How blind the Church can be in recognising such people.

It is so important to honour those whom God is raising up. All too often, however, our mind set is to want to drag such people into attending more meetings, instead of getting behind them in prayer, and releasing them to operate in arenas we ourselves have no access to.

We are also in danger of underestimating how intense the pressures can be in such elevated positions. Before we judge these people for not being more bold and effective in 'using' their position for Christ, remember that the wind blows much keenly at altitude than safely down at ground level!

Having said all that, we must face hard facts. The praise and fame that come our way in life test us every bit as severely as the traumas that we pass through. Fearful of losing face, many who rise to prominence all too quickly become preoccupied with their own survival. They may couch it in terms of living to fight another day, but in reality, they may have learnt to hide their light under a bushel in order to be acceptable to others.

It is easy to justify our compromise. 'It would be foolish to rock the boat,' we say. Or, 'Nobody would accept our standpoint anyway, so what's the point of saying anything?' By one means and another we learn to compromise. Institutions that are already fallen become more and more outposts of the devil's empire as the ways of godlessness take ever deeper root – all too often unchallenged.

There is no right or wrong moment at which to speak out. It is certainly true that character speaks louder than words. Yet the truth is that few, if any, will take the step of asking the Lord Jesus into their hearts without hearing the message explained to them in some way that makes sense. That's why we held an apologetics evening recently in church, to consider how we can share our faith intelligently. All being well, we will be sending out the fruit of this course over the next few months.

When I first saw Ros working on a ward as a student nurse, everyone could see the love and care that shone from her. Because she did

not know how to speak openly about her faith, her patients were left with the impression that she was simply an exceptionally lovely person. Quite unintentionally, the 'glory' went to her.

She found it excruciatingly hard to find the words with which to express her faith. It took her time and courage to do so with any degree of confidence. Praise God that she battled through to overcome. She has long been able to witness freely about the Lord, and to pray with people and bring people right through into experiencing God's love for themselves.

As Paul challenges us,

> *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.* (Philemon 6)

Being a Christian at work

In the survey *Christians at work and its implications for the Churches* (1993, Christians in Public Life Programs, CIPL), only 9% said they felt supported by their local church when it came to their time at work. In other words, the 'two cultures of working world and worshipping world have grown increasingly separate for them' (Roger Clarke).

It is so important that we do not divide life artificially into the 'spiritual' and the 'secular.' Everything becomes sacred when it is offered to God. It is not only missionaries serving overseas who deserve to have their photographs on the walls at the back of our churches: it should be all of us.

Ros and I love to visit people at their place of work because it helps us to see them in what is, after all, the greater part of their life and service. Sometimes we are able to help them to develop strategies for working there more effectively for the kingdom. Theirs is a mission field which takes them right onto the front line in the battle against secularism.

The example of Obadiah reminds us that we need to pray for Christians in their work place – and perhaps especially for those who have acquired a high standing in life.

Rather than pressing such people to attend more church meetings, or to assume greater responsibilities within the Church, it is for us to make the effort to be supporting them – not least that they may continue to serve the Lord rather than their own self interests.

- Repent of the lack of interest most Churches take in the world of work.
- Bring a number of modern day Obadiahs to the Lord in prayer – those who are serving in front line positions or in 'dangerous' places .
- Pray for courage to overcome your natural fear of man, and to take opportunities to tell people about the Lord at your place of employment.
  Ask the Lord if there are any steps you can take to be more effective in sharing the love of God with those for whom you have a particular burden.
- Pray about the fact that so many find church life alienating, and that it seems largely irrelevant to the business world.
- 'Spirituality' is very much an 'in' buzz word. Market leaders are aware that by introducing a bit of material for the 'soul' employees tend to be more profitable. People are beginning to craft their own belief and value systems, often "sticking together" bits and pieces from different ideologies – hence the introduction of TM, yoga and Fenshui into the life of many companies. These things are popular precisely because they make no emotional or moral demands on people – unlike a decision to follow Christ, which many presume will involve negative consequences. Pray that you can find ways to introduce people to *real* spirituality!

With God at Work

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

(John 5:17)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an

inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. *(Colossians 3:23-24)*

Mark Green, from London School of Theology, points out that work was given to us before the Fall of mankind. In other words it was part of His *plan* rather than part of the Fall. There are five references to God "working" in the first chapter of Genesis – precisely the same number of references that there are to Him "creating." In other words, work is part of our *worship* rather than the product of our *sin*.

Men are often prepared to talk about work in general terms (and sport in great detail) because they perceive it to be a 'safe' topic – but they tend not to talk about the issues that they are finding really hard: how to get on with their boss, secretary, approach their work load, lifestyle/work balance and so on. We need sermons on such subjects.

Charles Handy's books point out that such subjects as fear, love, trust, envy, sharing, courage are never mentioned in the traditional business world but they are the very stuff of life. He stresses that choices need to be made with responsibility looking at all people's needs. Changing management leadership styles, however, are being freely discussed nowadays.

We as Christians often agree with business diagnosis of situations, but we want to cry out that there is a resource that is being neglected – a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ!

There has never been a time when people have been more open to our values, even though stress levels are rising as the credit crunch deepens. people are trying to survive in the workplace with its stresses.

Changing World of Work

Leaving to one side those who are self employed (with all the advantages and challenges that that brings), the call is to move institutions from a hierarchical model to integrated and empowering ones.

Hierarchical models tend to have many accompanying structures: job security, traditions, titles and ranks. Whilst there is much to be said for developing a collegiate consensus approach, the biblical norm

remains that whenever God wants to achieve something dynamic and far reaching, His way is always to raise up leaders to front the task and to implement it.

In his overview of how to bring about transformational change to an organisation, Christian Schumacher concludes,

> *It is no exaggeration to say that the deeper and stronger the degree of team working, the greater the need to obey a leader. Team working enables one to understand the connection between love and obedience.*

The Schumacher approach refers back to the primary work of the Trinity:

The Father – creates and originates

The Son – transforms

The Spirit – empowers.

By developing a series of work-based seminars around this theme, he has found that companies which implement these ways of thinking lead to both an increase in productivity, and to a decrease in absenteeism.

This creates a sense of ownership which it is usually difficult to establish in companies of more than 200-300 employees. (The word 'company' derives from the Latin 'cum pane' – with bread).

Changing Management Styles

Companies which have strong ethical values are increasingly coming to the fore. They still need strategies and plans, but there is a flavour of something much more promising in the best of the current management writing that is now around.

Many such as Goldeman and Peter Serge are writing about emotional intelligence, and about loving and serving one another, and being willing to be vulnerable. These are exciting philosophies, and very close to biblical guidelines. Peter, for example, talks about a commitment to the truth, and being committed to having a shared vision – as opposed to permitting the latest business crisis to override our value systems.

The truth is, however, that most churches still seem to value people for what they *do* rather than for what they *are*. All of this points to the need first of all to build people up in the Lord, but then to go out to make an impact in the world for the Kingdom. To do this we need to embrace an emotional vocabulary, for this is what most touches people's hearts:

- the love and tenderness that put fear to flight and that best release faith,
- as well as flexible working structures that promote a better work/homelife balance.

Spiritually, we are always in trouble when we are more concerned for projects than for people. As Mark Green put it,

> *Our ultimate purpose is that people are inspired and redeemed in order to serve. It is ultimately a relationship and not a performance.*

Here are two simple but potentially far reaching questions to ask:

- *To what extent are we influenced by the spirit that is at work in our cities, and places of work?*
- *And what can we do to be different?*

The world is always watching much more closely than we realise! May the Lord help each one of us to be witnesses for His glory at work – and if we are going through a hard time ourselves, may the Lord make our hearts stronger rather than harder through the things that we suffer!