

Cutting-Edge Christianity

23



EACH NIGHT FOR NEARLY SIX WEEKS, TOM SLIPPED his car into a parking space overlooking the river. Rolling down his window so he could hear the sound of the water bursting over the rocks, he wept quietly. It was a private ritual, a sweeping out of pent-up emotion that started with his first waking hour of the day and rarely left him, even here by the river. Day after day he drove to a branch office and met with worker after worker, delivering the news that there wasn't any work left for them here.

Some got angry and shouted at him as if he were personally responsible. Some tried to make him feel better, accepting the news with grace. Others wept or tried to talk him into keeping them. A very few got physical, throwing items or punching walls. Tom handled every discussion with committed stoicism. He was intent on letting the need of the individual worker dictate how the session went. Those who needed to cry were encouraged to cry. Those who needed to yell were allowed to yell. He stayed as long as the emotion dictated, and he never retaliated. He also never wavered. He knew from experience the worst thing he could do for this group of workers was to give them hope they would be called back. It wasn't going to happen, and he owed it to

them not to take the easy way out by saying "maybe...".

Sixty workers in six weeks. Always the same pattern. Always ending by the river, emptying out the residue of the sadness he witnessed every day.

For most of the workers this had been the only place they'd ever worked. Years and years of security, years and years of relationships, years and years of labor uninterrupted by the changing technology.

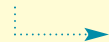
Not any more.

The severance packages helped. The continued insurance benefits, too, but almost nobody seemed interested in the retraining initiatives. Some because they were afraid, some because they were angry, but most refused because it felt too much like a hand-out.

Tom had guessed that would be the response. There wasn't any pleasure in discovering he was right.

On the last night of the last notice, Tom tidied his desk, slipped his resignation under the owner's door and headed to the river one last time. Getting out of his car, he started shouting at God.

If you were Tom, what would you have shouted?



Scripture Passage

Genesis 41

Introduction

The first study in this series tackled the reality that competition is a necessary component of an imperfect world. This is true because the Bible teaches us that no human being is righteous. This means that, if left to our own inclinations, we will choose to rebel against God. Competition is a practice we've introduced into society to motivate and challenge us because we often need to be goaded to advance, but it's also designed to protect us from greed, laziness, inefficiency, etc. Knowing that helps us to understand a fundamental reality of the workplace: competition exists, and we must learn to compete in ways that are still consistent with God's moral and ethical principles.

In the second study we discovered that not only does God want us to be good role models—good ambassadors—for Him in the workplace, but He also intends to accomplish His purposes in Creation by making use of working Christians in the middle of their jobs.

Since God is glorified by our best effort, by humility, by an attitude of service, and by integrity and competence, then these become new measuring sticks we use to determine success.

But succeeding isn't enough. Being competent isn't enough. Avoiding sinful behavior isn't enough.

God wants working Christians to be leaders. He wants us to be innovators. He wants us to be creative. In short, He expects us to be on the cutting edge of the redeeming aspects of our culture.

To prepare for this study, please read all of Chapter 41 in the book of Genesis—the story of Joseph's rise to the number two position in the kingdom of ancient Egypt. As you read, write down your impressions of Joseph in the space below.

In Depth

If you've been following these studies from the start, this is our twenty-third in a series of thirty. They're designed as a journey from self-absorption to a place where Jesus is Lord of all the areas of our lives, including work. Where do we see Joseph exercising initiative in this chapter?

What about creativity?

Joseph was providing security for the people of Egypt. (By the way, don't miss the fact that these were not his people.) He had no way of knowing God was using him to provide security for his family. In a later chapter (as we learned in lesson eleven) the very brothers who sold Joseph into slavery are rescued from the effects of the drought. What parallels might you draw from this for God's ability to accomplish multiple purposes through your work?

Turning aside from the idea of provision for our own families, though, can you think of a situation where the actions of Joseph might have been useful to Tom in the workplace snapshot at the beginning of this chapter?

Business historians teach that there are cycles in commerce, employment, even technology that form fairly predictable paths. They argue with good reason that we consign ourselves to repeating mistakes in the marketplace because we refuse to learn these patterns—or even when we learn them that we fail to introduce variables to change their ebb and flow. What often results is inefficient use of resources and needless impact on employees and even investors.

Joseph not only interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he introduced a plan to stem the effects. Especially for Christian managers and leaders in businesses, we owe our workers (customers, investors, shareholders, etc.) a commitment to long-term planning that anticipates these ebbs and flows, and mitigates their effects on the people God puts under our care.

Can you think of other times in Scripture when creativity and long-term planning are evident? Think about the problems of administration Moses faced and Jethro's advice to him. Think about Daniel and his friends who were in an executive training program that violated the principles of their faith. Think about Nehemiah and his leadership in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem. Scripture is full of the accounts of leaders who

exhibited not merely a flair for short-term solutions, but plans that mitigated future problems for the people under their charge as well.

Even the concept of grace is an example of this principle. God, anticipating the sinful rebellion of humans, made a way for their redemption. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

God didn’t design us to serve ourselves. He designed us to be in fellowship with Him, and to take care of others as *we tend* His creation. The role of the Christian at work is to find ways to express their appreciation to God by caring for His creation and its people—and to do so in it in cutting-edge, creative, compassionate ways.

When the focus of our work is centered on serving others, then He takes care of the issues of provision in our lives. When the focus of our work is on provision, then the work He expects us to be doing sometimes goes undone, and the suffering of others is our fault.

Work is not primarily a competition. It’s not merely a way to provide for ourselves. It’s not a way to keep ourselves occupied until eternity arrives. It’s not a way to earn God’s free gift of grace.

Work is our way of glorifying God because of His provision for us—eternally in the case of grace, and temporally in the case of shelter, food and basic needs. Work is a trust placed in our hands by God, with an eye towards letting us work alongside Him in the lives of others.

Unless we step outside the idea that our jobs serve us, we consign ourselves to jobs with little eternal satisfaction, and we consign those God places in our care to roller-coaster rides that teach them little of a loving God.

In your work, what problems are you overlooking? Whose voice do you hear when others look to you for answers?

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Christians should be leaders in problem-solving not only in the culture, but the workplace as well.
- God created us to be in fellowship with Him, but He also expects us to be on the cutting edge of redeeming aspects of our workplace and culture.
- The past offers insight into solving problems in the present.
- While the Bible teaches us about God, it also teaches us how to tend His creation.
- If we study the way Biblical characters confronted dilemmas in their cultures and their lives, we can often learn ways to address dilemmas in our own workplaces and our own lives.