



Representing the King: Lessons Learned

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Daniel and friends in Babylon. Joseph in Egypt. Thrust into cultures very different from their own, they served well and were greatly used by God to advance His kingdom and further the welfare of His people. God allowed tough circumstances that developed their character and their faith, empowering their witness to leaders and unbelievers in pagan societies.



Marlise Streitmatter

Their examples still resonate down the years. My workplace is a multinational institution, employing the best and brightest of over 185 countries, representing religions from all over the world. I view my role as one of ambassador for Christ. The dynamics of spiritual warfare are palpable, almost on a daily basis. It is a challenging environment, intellectually, politically, and spiritually.

In an increasingly global and secular society, we all come in contact with people of different cultures and belief systems. For many of us, “work” is our ministry. We spend a lot of time there—for at least five days a week, usually more waking hours than at home. It is among those with whom we interact regularly that we can have the greatest impact.

Yet one of the most difficult places to live out one’s faith is at work. There, we face the struggles that come with the routines and personalities of office life, exposing our best and worst qualities. Questions of ethics, morality, and simple right and wrong confront us in the course of a normal day. Our true character, or lack of it, is revealed in these situations.

While rubbing shoulders with those in the highest echelons of Babylonian society, Daniel and his friends did not waver in their commitment to faith. Living among the heathen, they did not ascribe to the systems of the world. They neither ate the king’s choice food nor bowed to foreign gods. Their lives were founded on the character and word of the living God, not the idols of this world.

Kingdom Perspective

A similar challenge greets us daily. We have opportunities to influence for good or for ill. Our choices often determine the course of our nation and the world. Even though we observe the fallibility of our leaders regularly and firsthand, the world’s siren of power and influence calls. It takes effort on our part to maintain a kingdom perspective as they did, faithfully challenging the culture, day by day, rather than allowing it to shape the way we live.

My understanding of the need for such perspective has grown considerably in the past eighteen months, when I have had to trust God during many tense, tough days. I have recognized the importance of seeking God’s will and kingdom prayerfully, daily, and lifting up our leaders, my workplace, and my colleagues in prayer. I find I need to be reminded to seek first the priorities of the kingdom. When I wake to the demands that press in for the day, am I taking the time to prayerfully put them in the context of God’s larger purposes?

There is an opportunity for a testimony in times of adversity if our response is different from that of the world. Am I willing to trust God’s higher ways, as Joseph did, or do I take things into my own hands, intent on advancing my career?

When dark days come, so do questions. How Joseph must have wondered what God was doing! His reward for resisting temptation was a plummet from a place in the house of Pharaoh to prison. But it is clear from the Scriptures that Joseph came to understand that God was in it. He trusted God's sovereign plan.

I can testify to the same. It is through challenging situations that God disciplines us and exposes our need for dependence upon Him. In the desperate moments, the depth of my inadequacy is revealed. Yet there is a deep peace that comes from submitting to God's will. Joseph's sterling character was formed through long, difficult circumstances, later to be on display and recognized even among those in an idolatrous culture. As Eugene Peterson writes, "we are reshaped through the days of our obedience."¹

Kingdom Living

In retrospect, we tend to see only the completed picture, skipping from the beginning to the result. God rewarded Joseph's commitment; his wisdom and spiritual discernment eventually led to a powerful position in Egypt. It can be easy to forget that, in reality, he was grinding it out, day after day, in the confines of a prison and in conversations with the jailer, the cupbearer, and the baker. So it is with us. Our conversation reveals the condition of our heart, and nowhere is this more important than at work.

It has been said that knowledge is power. Rumor, gossip, and innuendo shape opinion, both in the mass media and in the smaller-scale politics of office life. And in the politically supercharged environment in which many of us work, it is hard to refrain from falling into this trap of the world.

James describes the tongue as "a restless evil and full of deadly poison," "set on fire by hell."² The propensity to gossip is an ever-looming, insidious temptation and has the potential, perhaps more than anything else in our day-to-day work life, to seriously undermine our Christian testimony.

For me, in many ways it is ground zero. The authenticity of my witness is compromised when I fail to resist the negative talk about others which so often characterizes the to and fro of the workplace. It is usually a matter of pride. I want to impress another or protect myself, unwilling to pay

the cost of appearing to be "not in the loop." I desire either to score points with someone who may not hold the best view of me, or to not lose face with someone who already thinks well of me. Indeed, gossip is hardest to control among friends.

But as James points out, this is twisted thinking, reflecting a divided heart. It is an issue of integrity. Am I praising God during my morning devotions, and criticizing colleagues and public officials, made in His image, later in the day? He states it very clearly: "My brethren, these things ought not to be this way."³ Given what the scriptures say about his testimony, it is hard to imagine Joseph engaging in destructive gossip.

With our speech, we have the power either to bless or to curse. We all have experienced the power of an encouraging word and the sting of a harsh one. "Let your speech be always with grace," Paul instructed the Colossians, "seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how to respond to each person."⁴ Like any good ambassador, what I say should accurately represent the authority under which I serve. If I desire a pure reflection of Christ in the marketplace, I must take care to control my tongue. Easy to say in the flesh, but very hard to do!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spells out the righteous lifestyle of those who belong to the kingdom of God. He calls us to live differently than the world. Among other things, He says we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. How the tenor in Washington would change if we Christians were obedient on this point! I certainly fail, and often. It seems natural to pray for our friends and those we care about. It is not natural to pray for those who hurt us or intend harm against someone in whom we are vested.

Joseph, having survived kidnapping, slavery, and prison, when given the chance did not take the opportunity to seek revenge against his brothers. Instead, he forgave, assuring them that although "you meant evil against me, God meant it for good."⁵

In the modern age, from time to time we hear stories of missionaries or the families of victims of heinous crimes who follow the Lord's example of loving enemies. We see and the world sees the difference in their approach to injustice and it's impressive—so much so that it makes the news.

In the rough and tumble of Washington life, we frequently are faced with the choice to love enemies. But how does one live like this? It is an arduous task, requiring more than the proverbial nod of assent. There is a cost. But we also have the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of our Lord. Scriptures say that when suffering under verbal attacks, Jesus did not respond in kind, but kept entrusting Himself to the One who judges justly.⁶

In addition to trusting the sure, sovereign hand of God, I need the Spirit's filling—Christ's presence in me—every day. I also have learned that I must exercise discipline to protect my heart and mind, daily putting on the full armor of God. The armor is necessary because, as Paul reminds us, our weapons are not of the flesh, and we do not war according to the flesh.⁷ Rather, our weapons are God's truth, prayer, faith, righteousness, and the gospel message of peace through forgiveness. To live this radically different lifestyle that God will bless, I must be controlled by the Spirit day in and day out.

Salt and Light

The presence of the Spirit is apparent to those around us, even if we ourselves are unaware. Daniel was tapped by more than one king because his colleagues saw that he was a person of integrity who possessed "an extraordinary spirit."⁸ His life reflected the power, majesty, and character of God.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this in my own life to date occurred at a diplomatic event in the Middle East. I was conversing intently with a fellow American in a side room off the main reception area when we were interrupted by three women in traditional Muslim dress whom I had never met. They spoke little English and I don't speak Arabic, but the sense of urgency was evident on their faces when they indicated that they wanted to talk with me. "We can see that you have God on your face," they said once we were seated. "What do you believe?" Through an interpreter, and amidst the clamor and chatter of the ongoing reception, I was able to share with them my belief that Jesus is the Christ and the only way of salvation. In the darkest of places, the light of Christ was shining through me.

It was a reminder that we must always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we

have, making the most of every opportunity. God is faithful to open doors for the gospel, sometimes when we least expect.

More often, we are given opportunities through the ordinary. When Michael Ramsden spoke at the Institute's annual banquet this past year, he stressed that salt is effective when it is rubbed into foods. It is important, then, that we take a personal interest in those with whom we work. Genesis 40 tells us that Joseph took note of those around him, befriending the cupbearer and the baker. He noticed when they appeared discouraged and listened to their concerns. He talked to them about spiritual things and counseled them about their futures, all the while giving credit to God. I have observed that in any culture, basic kindness goes a long way, whether it be a word to the security officer, inquiries about a co-worker's children, or shared concern for aging parents.

About a year after I moved to Washington, I received a call from a former colleague in Illinois saying his father had passed away. We talked for quite awhile, but after we hung up, I regretted that I wouldn't be able to go back for the funeral. At the time, I was scheduled to depart on an extended international trip for the U.S. government. But I couldn't help thinking that I needed to be there. My friend's past experiences with "religion" had left a bad taste in his mouth, but my faith had not been a barrier to our friendship at work. This was an opportunity to minister to him at a very important time. After conversations with friends back home, I made the decision to fly back to Illinois for 24 hours before departing on my trip. I will never forget the look on his face when he saw me walk through the door. My being there during his time of loss demonstrated God's love to him through me, and my commitment to him as a friend. It mattered, to him personally and to the advance of the kingdom.

God promises that we will reap a harvest in due time if we do not grow weary in doing good. At times, the daily grind can seem overwhelming. The bureaucracy of life beats us down. But, the examples of Daniel and Joseph inspire me. God is faithful to complete what He has started, and the clear evidence of His redemptive purposes in their lives encourages me.

A well-worn accessory of mine is a simple cross, and people often comment on its beauty.

When they do, it gives me pause. Is my life consistent with the One that cross represents? Am I walking in a manner worthy of His call? My heart's desire is to be able to answer in the affirmative, along with unbelievers, so that when they learn that I am a Christian, they can immediately say, "Oh yes, that makes sense. She lives like a follower of Christ."

Endnotes

¹ Peterson, Eugene H., *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000, p. 106.

² James 3:8.

³ James 3:9-10.

⁴ Colossians 4:6.

⁵ Genesis 50:20.

⁶ 1 Peter 2:23.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 10:3-4.

⁸ Daniel 5:11-12.

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