

Heroes of the Faith Series

Faith Work and Power

A study

based on 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.' But there was nothing humorous about the murderous regime they set up. The whole cause of God's cause on earth was in jeopardy from their deadly attack. (Every Jezebel needs an Ahab through whom to achieve their deadly work. The chemistry between this married pair created just the right conditions for evil to flourish).

Time and again in Scripture we find so much depending 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 . . .the list is endless and the consequences don't bear

thinking of. Obadiah's name means 'servant of the Lord,' and the Lord needed him to shelter this large group of prophets. We won't ask too deeply how he managed to acquire and account for the extra food and water that they must have consumed in such a 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 (we tend to shrivel 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 – especially when they've got a Wanted Notice out for them! To his credit he overcame his fears and played the vital role as the messenger who brought Elijah back in touch with his arch foe.

Deep down, Ahab appears to have been 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 absent himself, but to provoke the greatest spiritual crunch crisis of all time.

Those who serve in public places

Today, we are going to remember those 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. All too often our mindset is still to drag such people into attending our meetings instead of getting behind them in prayer and releasing them to operate in arenas where we ourselves have no access. It is so important to honour those whom God is raising up.

We are also in danger of underestimating how intense the pressures are in such positions. Before you 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 all 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. (See Final Section for Further Reflection: The Nature of Power)

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.

- Bring a number of modern day Obadiahs to the Lord now in prayer.
- Pray for courage to overcome your natural fear of man, and to have many opportunities to tell people about the Lord at your place of employment. Ask the Lord if there are any special steps you can take to be more effective in sharing the love of God with those for whom you have a particular burden.
- The fact that so much of church life is alienating for people with no experience of it, and that it seems irrelevant to the business world.
- Repent of the lack of interest most Churches take in the world of work.

- ‘Spirituality’ is very much an ‘in’ buzz word. Market leaders are aware that by opening up a bit of ‘soul’ it will help people be more profitable. People are beginning to craft their own belief and value systems. Hence the introduction of TM, yoga and Feng shui 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 would be a negative experience.

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. 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, the same number of references as there are to Him “creating.” In other words, work is part of our worship – not the product of our sin.

What initiatives are you aware of to help develop Christian leaders and managers?

Mark Green asks these questions: Would some sort of a course for managers be the best place to start? What level of managers? Would it be best to lead to a qualification or to start with a weekend? How could it be marketed and paid for? There is a new role model : Anita Roderick pioneered ‘*Business with Integrity*’ but from a New Age perspective. There is a real need for Christian equivalents in the UK. The broad goal is to define a biblical value system for business, with Jesus as our role model.

- To equip people to serve those whom they lead.
- To valuing each individual and to truly motivate and empower them.

Given that this is happening, there is even more need for Christians to be involved in this world. To provide a sound spiritual basis.

We need to put together a package for managers that will help them provide sound development of professional skills; proper ethics and genuine and inspired spirituality.

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 discussed now, freely.

We as Christians will often agree with the modern business diagnosis of situations (especially when it embraces such concepts as these) 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.

In ‘*The Truth about Westminster*,’ Patrick Dixon – author of *Future-wise* – takes us behind the headlines to give a measured view, based on a series of revealing interviews backed by detailed research. He finds many MPs and Peers struggling with great pressures, conflicts and moral dilemmas. He concludes that the system itself is corrupting, and he proposes comprehensive reforms. He believes men and women with integrity have a vital role to play.

See <http://www.globalchange.com/taw/index.htm>

Below is a link to one of his articles about Christians in politics in Britain.

<http://www.globalchange.com/taw/TAW-Chapter12.htm>

Changing World of Work

Leaving to one side for the purposes of this context those who are self employed (with all the challenges and advantages that that brings), the challenge is to move an institution from a hierarchical model to an integrated and empowering one. 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 detailed 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 an entire series of work-based seminars around this theme, he has found that companies which implement these ways of thinking both increase productivity, and 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 very word company derives from the Latin ‘cum pane’ – with bread).

Changing Management Styles

Companies which have values(# which 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 Goldman and Peter Serge are writing about emotional intelligence and 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.

Tom Marshall reminds us that we need to underpin a philosophy of leadership and management – yet 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. This isn't just a 'man' thing – it's for all of us, and it must embrace the emotional vocabulary which 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 better work/homelife balance.

In other words, we are as concerned for people as we are for projects.

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".

For Further Reflection: The Nature of Power

Obadiah lived in the human power centre of the nation: King Ahab's court. His example inspires me to offer this additional section, which is largely drawn from *Meet the Corporation*, a chapter in Tom Marshall's excellent book *Understanding Leadership*.

I want us to consider the way forward by looking back. Human history is largely the story of groups of people coming together. The cities which dominate Bible history are Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre and Sidon, Damascus, Rome, Athens and, of course, towering above them all, Jerusalem. Cities have always been the target for military conquest, the centre of trade, the seat of political power, and the focus of culture and civilisation. The fact that we also tend to identify cities with violence, and that they are often the centre for occult practices, is merely an example of just how far the Fall has affected mankind.

Cities represent the heart of a nation. God visits nations with judgement usually because the life of its primary cities was found wanting. That's one reason why we shouldn't all pack our bags and head for the country. Floyd McClung has excellent teaching on the subject in his book, 'Spirits of the City'. But on a much smaller level Tom Marshall shows how the city can be said to stand for each individual organisation, institution, denomination or even church.

Each 'city' gains its own identity and assumes its own character. Babylon is called the 'Mother of Harlots', Jerusalem is called 'Ariel, the Lion of God'. (Is 29:1) Nineveh is the 'bloody city' (Nahum 3:1) and Tyre is the 'jubilant' city (Is 23:7).

Organisations and institutions tend to be open and malleable to begin with but gradually become increasingly fixed in their ways and in the use of power. Everything tends towards survival. One Prime Minister was asked to describe the first principal of government. Instead of saying that the first principal of government is to govern well and justly he replied, "The first principal of government is to stay in power." That is realpolitik – and it stinks!

A haughty arrogance accompanies this passion to survive. Babylon says, "I am and there is none besides me" (Is. 47:8, 10), just as Nineveh does in Zephaniah 2:15

Tyre is equally as bad; 'In the pride of her heart she says, "I am a God; I sit on the throne of a God in the heart of the seas" (Ezek. 28:2). The arrogance of Tyre is so great that it becomes an almost perfect picture of Lucifer himself.

It is not only in the city states of ancient times that you can see these tendencies. You can find them in totalitarian state, the modern board room, the football teams and even church and denominational institutions. One business review advised applicants for top executive posts in large corporations not to bother applying if they had a happy marriage. Their argument was that if they were happily married they would not give their ultimate loyalty to their job. This is the false loyalty (let's call it idolatry) which characterises so much of city life.

It helps us to understand how Satan and his demons become the rulers of the world's system: "The God of the present age," as the Bible puts it. The rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world and the forces of evil in the heavenly realms against which we are to contend (Eph 6:12). (2 Cor 4:4, 1 John 5:19, Matt.4:8-10, John 12:31).

Look at how the corporate mind of a nation etc gets influenced by satanic forces. There have been many Adolf Hitler and Robert Mugabes in history. It is always a kindness to pray against such people coming to power elsewhere, and for those who are the victims of such tyrants. Many will wrestle with their consciences on this point, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer

had to do as he watched Nazi thugs wielding abusive powers and destroying the people of God.

You only have to look at the deadlocked situation that so often exists between bosses and their employees, between blacks (#coloured people? Ethnic?) and whites and so on to see echoes of this battle on a wider social and spiritual field. The devil is always on the alert to develop mind-sets we could call them mind fields!) that prepare the way for such evils as apartheid, slavery, holocausts to occur.

The Lord Jesus Himself was born into an oppressed country. There could be no mistaking the presence of a cruel occupying power. The mighty Roman Empire was ever present and ever poised to crush the least sign of revolt. Moreover the taxes they were extorting were bleeding the country white.

In addition, but quite separately, there was a strong religious power that was both legalistic and repressive. Synagogue and Sanhedrin alike opposed Jesus because He was a threat to their way of controlling and ordering people's lives. They were quite prepared to do away with Him simply because He healed people on the Sabbath day.

God is brilliantly imaginative in the way He raises up anointed servants to deliver people from the hands of the oppressing powers. Who else but God would have thought of leading His people out of bondage through the Red Sea? Or delivering the nation through Deborah or Gideon? Or sending a female oboeist to Hong Kong to rescue drug addicts (Jackie Pullinger) or Heidi Baker to work amongst the poorest of the poor in Mozambique? Or saving the world, for that matter, through someone born in a stable and crucified on a cross?

Jesus lived surrounded by these oppressive powers but He was completely free from their dominance. So free indeed that He had no hesitation in challenging head on the spirit of the Synagogue, by deliberately healing the sick on the Sabbath. When Herod threatened Him, His answer was curt and to the point,

Go and tell that fox, "Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I finish my course"

(Luke 13:32 RSV).

To Pilate He replied, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above"

(John 19:11 RSV).

The most astonishing result of this life of freedom was not that it ended in some last heroic stand, like General Custor against the Indians – a forlorn gesture of a lone brigand against a mighty occupying power – but in an apparent and most inexplicable surrender to these same powers. He surrendered Himself to the religious power of the Sanhedrin, who gleefully handed Him over to the military power, the Romans to have him put to death. Most extraordinarily of all, Jesus appeared to surrender to the power of satan when He said, “This is your hour and the power of darkness” (Luke 22:53 RSV).

The word “handed over” is as undramatic and understated as it would be to say that Czechoslovakia “handed over” to Nazi Germany. Yet, as we all know, it was by this surrender, and apparent defeat that the way to salvation was made available for all people everywhere. There is a great deal for us to ponder here in the way that the Lord uses the weak, the least and the last in order to further His greatest and His highest purposes.

It is interesting to think of all the things that Jesus might have been or done, but which He chose not to do. Not a King or Political Leader. Nothing could deviate Him from obedience to his Father’s will.

The final victory to overcome was death. That is why the victory of the resurrection is so important to understand and to proclaim. People used to flock to visit Lenin’s tomb, but Lenin’s body was just rotting there. What a contrast from the empty tomb from which Jesus had risen! Death had no hold on Him.

And having disarmed the powers and authorities He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross

(Col 2:15).

He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right-hand in the heavenly realms, far above all authority, power and dominion and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come

(Eph. 1:20-21).

Jesus triumphed not only over the demonic powers but also over the structural powers – what Paul calls the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Thus the authority that we are rightly to submit to in this world is only the penultimate authority: Jesus said that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me (Matt 28:18). Moreover we have

been granted something of the authority of the risen Lord Himself and are therefore to exercise his lordship wherever we go and whenever we pray.

As Smith Wigglesworth reminds us, “An ounce of faith is worth a ton of asking!”

If we do not set to work in prayer for this level of opposition at the structural level, however, as well as the personal level, our efforts may end in frustration. Communist powers took over institutions and had clear strategies for doing so in order to bring down existing governments. We must be as clear-sighted in our own programme of enthroning the Lord, in order to rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated (Is 61:4). Jesus said that we were to tie up the strong man first and then we can plunder his house (Mark 3:27).

To do this we need to be free from fear. Most of the institutions and powers we are called to deal with are fallen rather than demonic. We are to set ourselves the long and hard task of seeking to redeem them and to bring them to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not called simply to withdraw from them, for we are to be salt and light in society. Beyond necessary policy changes however lies the need for radical character change, and that is as much a spiritual issue as a moral one.

The Lord does not try to hide the extent of a problem – or the impending devastation of a city for that matter from us – and we must not hide it from each other either. It is much easier to criticise and condemn the failings of these institutions than to care for them and to love them into life again. We need the heart of the Lord – which will often involve weeping and mourning, and persevering in the particular burdens that God gives us. (It should go without saying that we can only give ourselves to a specific and limited number of objectives – which is why we need to know what our primary burdens are).

All the great intercessors of the Bible identified themselves with the sins and needs of the particular nation or grouping that they were called to work for. They were also willing to become a part of the answer to their own prayers. When we intercede we are asking God to intervene, but we must also be prepared to become involved ourselves. Otherwise our prayer is not truly authentic.

In every area of our life we need goals if we are to succeed – because “He who aims at nothing generally hits it every time!” Change takes time, and if we are impatient or lacking in perseverance, our impact is likely to be

minimal. Also, if our attitude is wrong, and we are judgemental and not respectful, and have no humble willingness to learn from other people (even from non-Christians) we again will not go very far. It is all too easy for prayer groups to pretend to be discerning when all they are really being is judgemental!

Thus in every church structure we need to know what is right for this particular group of people and particular fellowship. The emphasis of one will not be the emphasis of the other.

The more fully a vision is in our heart, and that it is clearly restated and believed in by others, the more people will want to commit themselves together for it. Many are prepared to join movements or churches which are clear in their understanding what it is trying to do. Thus in every church structure we need to know what is right for this particular group of people and particular fellowship. The emphasis of one will not be the emphasis of the other.

To do this we need to be together. We simply cannot overestimate the advantage of prayer partners, and then harnessing ourselves in the wider grouping. There is a difference between the rat-tat-tat type prayer and the focused missile prayer. Through being together and sharing what we are going through, we are able to withstand the kickback that so often accompanies serious attempts to reach out to others.

As growth comes, it is important to develop flexible structures rather than bureaucratic ones that will cramp the Spirit's flow. We need flexibility to get the work done that is right for each part of the Body to do for itself.

We can take it for granted that there will be opposition from one angle or another. We either cave in under this pressure or we bash through. The kingdom of God is no place for cowards.

It is helpful to write down our goals:

- As a cluster group
- For your church or organisation
- For your city
- For your profession
- For your own personal life and development.

Write them under those headings and store them in a safe place.

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

(Ephesians 1:17-18).

