

Following Jesus at work * Exodus 1; Judges 4 & 5; Ruth 1 & 2
April 16, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Given that we just finished up our women and work Bible study on Tuesday night, I thought I'd take today to share with you some of the things that we talked about in our time together. We had some really great conversations about some really important issues and it would really be a shame for you to miss out on those.

So we're going to take today to look at some case studies from our Bible study to think about what it means to follow Jesus in the workplace.

Now if you're retired or the home is your workplace, don't tune out because what we talk about today applies to the way you spend your time in retirement, applies to the way you volunteer, applies to the way you raise children and clean house. Work is work even if we don't get paid for it.

So let's look today at three case studies to talk about what it means to follow Jesus at work.

We're going to cover a lot of ground today so I would encourage you to have your Bible open in front of you. That way you can see the details as I'm giving you the big picture. The first passage of Scripture we're going to look at today is Exodus 1 starting around verse 8. Exodus 1:8.

As Exodus begins, the Israelites are in Egypt and they're thriving in Egypt. You may recall from the last chapters of Genesis (and the plot of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*), famine had driven Jacob and his family to Egypt and Joseph set them up there as farmers in a fertile land. ~~(Verse 7 says: "...the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them.")~~

But then, verse 8, a new king, who did not know about Joseph (and all he had done to benefit Egypt), came to power in Egypt.

And the king said, verse 9 (I'll paraphrase) – 'Ok, listen, there are WAY too many Israelites living in Egypt right now – there's like five of them for every one of us – and so we need to put them under our feet so that they won't rebel against us or join our enemies and overthrow us.'

And so, verse 11: So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.

You know, we often think that the Israelites built the pyramids when they were enslaved in Egypt but those pyramids had actually been there for hundreds of years before that. The Israelites *could* have visited the pyramids, except that they were forced to build cities for the Pharaoh.

But, wouldn't you know it, in God's sovereignty: 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread;

Unfortunately, that meant that "...the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites 13 and worked them ruthlessly. 14 They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly."

Even that though did not thin them out and so the king of Egypt decided to try a different tack.

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah,

16 "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live."ⁱⁱⁱ

This puts Puah and Shiphrah in a difficult situation.ⁱⁱⁱ These women are tasked with delivering babies into the world and this ruthless pharaoh wants them to take 'em out if they're boys. Their 'boss' is asking them to commit genocide. What are they going to do? What would you do?

Here's what they did:

17 The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.

They knew that it was more important to do the right thing in God's eyes than to do the evil thing their boss told them to do.^{iv}

20 [And] So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.

21 And because the midwives feared [honoured, revered, respected, obeyed] God, he gave them families of their own.

I doubt that your boss has ever asked you to perpetrate genocide, but, maybe you've run into a situation where the boss wants you to fudge the numbers a little. Or cut some corners to increase the profits. Have you had an employer ask you to do something that you know is contrary to God's values? What do you do in that situation?

What did Puah and Shiphrah do? Verse 17 – they feared God and refused to do the things that pharaoh told them to do. They put God first and did what He would do, refusing to compromise and instead acting with the conviction that God's ways are right, every time.

And that I think is the principle that we can carry into our own workplaces. Whether we're paid or not, whether we're retired or working, we can follow Jesus in our working lives by living out His values and upholding His truth. We can follow Jesus at work by doing what He would do.^v

When Jesus calls us to take up the Cross, He calls us to identify with Him, to walk in His footsteps. Standing up to injustice at work and doing what's right when you could do what's wrong is a very practical way to take up your cross and follow Him.

So if we're going to follow Jesus at work, we need to do what He would do.

Let's go on now to Judges chapter 4. Judges chapter 4: the story of Deborah.

At the time of the judges, Israel had gotten itself into a downward spiral of idolatry – things would be good and then they'd turn their backs on God to worship other gods, God would send an enemy to straighten them out, they'd call out to God to rescue them, He would by sending a 'judge' or 'deliverer' and then they'd be back to normal again, until the cycle started all over.

In Judges 4, Deborah was the judge who was sent to lead the people back to faithfulness. Judges 4:4:

4 Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading (judging) Israel at that time.

5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.

So that's her office – under the palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim – sounds like a pretty sweet gig – and she would arbitrate between people who came to her to work out conflicts. Deuteronomy 25 describes what Deborah was doing 'judging' the people – she was deciding cases, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. So that's Deborah: judge and civic arbitrator when there were conflicts between people.

At the same time though there was a greater conflict going on – (verse 2) the king of Canaan had invaded Israel (because of their idolatry) and for twenty years, he and his general Sisera had oppressed the Israelites. Eventually they came to their senses and God called up Deborah to be the judge in charge.

Deborah was the judge but she was not going to be the deliverer. Verse 6, presumably with a word from the LORD, Deborah sent for a military leader named Barak to go lead his army against Sisera. Barak though seems to have been a bit timid and only wanted to go if Deborah would go, and so Deborah agreed, but now the honour for the victory would not go to Barak but instead to a woman.

Long story short, Deborah and Barak won the day and a woman named Jael took down Sisera when he took a nap in her tent but what I want to focus on is the song that got written down after in chapter 5.

I think that Deborah wrote it down because in verse 7 it says:

7 [Because of the enemy occupation] Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I, Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel (Jdg 5:7 NIV).

She tells us here that she has played an important role here in the transition from chaos to order in her nation. The invaders are gone and peace has returned and she was the spearhead for the whole thing.

And yet, listen to the way that she gives out credit for the victory:

2 "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves-- praise the LORD! (Jdg 5:2 NIV).

9 My heart is with Israel's princes, with the willing volunteers among the people. Praise the LORD! (Jdg 5:9 NIV).

18 The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the heights of the field. (Jdg 5:18 NIV).

4 "O LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water. (Jdg 5:4 NIV).

Deborah was the judge of all Israel. She was the one with all authority. She had a male general in Barak who didn't really want to go to war. When the time came to assign the glory, she could have very easily kept it to herself. '*I* am the mother of Israel; Barak did diddly-squat.' And yet what did she say:

The princes took the lead, the people willingly offered themselves, the LORD Himself went out and gave us victory.

This is a wonderful example of giving credit where credit is due. Have you ever worked hard on something and someone else swooped in at the last minute and took credit for it? Frustrating isn't it? Deborah's example I think shows us the importance of giving credit where credit is due as a child of God.

Which means that we follow Jesus at work by giving credit where credit is due. It would be very easy for us to claim the glory for things, but humility like Deborah's shows us the importance for spreading it around. If someone's done good work, praise them for it. If someone has helped you out, thank them for it. I think that the world would be a better place if we all got better at saying 'thank you!' and 'well done!'

And Deborah also reminds us to give thanks to God for work well done. We work hard for our paychecks; we put time and effort and energy into the things that we accomplish; but it's ultimately God who gives us that strength and energy to do what we do. And so it's helpful for us to be able to stop at the end of the day and say 'Lord, thank You for all that you've done to enable me to do what I did today.'

Following Jesus means giving credit where credit is due.

And finally, let's go ahead to the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth actually happens during the time of the Judges and so it appears after Judges but before the Samuels. The book of Ruth. And we'll start in chapter two, but let me tell you what happens in chapter one first.

So Ruth chapter one: during the time of the judges, there was a man named Elimelech who lived in Bethlehem with his wife and two sons. 'Beth' 'lehem' means 'house' 'of bread' but when famine hit there was no bread to be had – no bread in the house of bread – and so Elimelech and his wife Naomi took off to Moab (a non-Jewish territory) to find some food.

While they were there, Elimelech's sons married Gentile women, Orpah and Ruth, but then Elimelech died and then his sons did too. And that left Naomi alone with two daughters-in-law – Ruth and Orpah. Naomi told the girls 'go back to your families; you're better off with them than with me' and Orpah left but Ruth decided that she would stick with Naomi and live with her. And so eventually Ruth and Naomi left Moab and returned to Bethlehem, just in time for the barley harvest.

That's where we'll pick up the story in chapter 2. Chapter 2, verse 1, Ruth said to Naomi:

"[I'd like to] go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."

Now that in and of itself is neat; Ruth is talking about the practice of gleaning. OT society didn't have a welfare system but it was set up so that the poor were given opportunities to provide for themselves and gleaning was one of the ways that they did that.

You can read about it in Deuteronomy 24^{vi} and Leviticus 19.^{vii} Essentially, gleaning means that if you're a land owner, when you harvest your fields, you don't reap to the very edges or go back over it a second time; you leave some of the produce in the field so that the poor and outsiders could make a living by gleaning that field for themselves.^{viii}

Ruth says 'I want to go pick up the leftovers' and Naomi says 'ok' and so off she went to glean.

Verse 3 - 3 So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was [actually a relative] of Elimelech.

Probably around lunch, Boaz showed up at the field and greeted his workers and began asking about Ruth when he saw this new girl out in the field. A foreman said to him: "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi." And then he tells us something interesting about how she's been working while she was out in the field.

Verse 7, the foreman says that she came and asked permission to glean in the field and then "she went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

The Bible study book puts it like this: "Imagine Ruth on her hands and knees, following the reapers as she gathered kernels of grain they had left behind. How much could she find to feed herself and her mother-in-law between now and the next harvest? Diligently, she kept at her task... deter[mined] not to rest or to miss any barley on the ground."^{ix}

She's just been working away, picking up stems that have fallen behind and collecting grain from the field. It doesn't matter if the boss is watching or not; she's working hard all the time.

And that got the boss's attention. Verse 8, Boaz said (verse 8): "Stay working here, don't go glean in another field. I've told my men to treat you well (which might not have been the case in another field), you can go along with the girls and enjoy the benefits of working on my team."

Ruth's hard work paid off. They say 'dance like no one's watching;' I'd say: 'work hard, even when no one's watching.'

And that's actually an idea that appears in the New Testament too. If you go ahead to Colossians 3:22, it says:

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

I just want to clarify that slavery is wrong and we're certainly not slaves to our employers, but we can transfer the principle into our own workplaces.

'Work hard, not only when the boss's eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.'

You've probably seen this happen – you've seen people at work, slacking off and doing nothing when the boss is not around but then when he appears going 'he's coming, he's coming, look busy.'

‘Not so with you’ the Bible says. Work hard whether they’re watching or not.

And Colossians 3 actually shifts the motivation for why we would do that. Did you notice that? Work hard ‘with sincerity of heart and reverence of the Lord.’

We often think about working hard to earn our paycheque, but Paul says here ‘work hard, because when you do, you honour God.’ Did you ever think about that? The work you do on Monday morning can be just as much an offering of worship to God as what we do here at church on a Sunday!

The next verse makes that abundantly clear and drives home the point whether you’re paid for your work or not:

23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men...

Whatever you do – working at a school, working in an office, working in the fields, working on a job site, mowing the grass, doing the dishes, making a meal, cleaning your room – work at it with all your heart with the conviction that you’re not just doing it to get the job done; you’re doing it to honour the God who is your Creator, redeemer and sustainer.

We can follow Jesus at work by working hard, whatever we do.

I like the way the Message paraphrases Romans 12:1:

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

You get the impression with Ruth that it didn’t really matter if people were watching; she was going to glean that field and do it to the best of her ability. She’s a model for us for a fellow child of God. We can follow Jesus at work by working hard, whatever we do.

So, let’s take a minute now to wrap this up and apply it in our lives. One of the most important things that you can do as a Christian is to shift your mind from thinking of Christianity as ‘going to church on Sundays’ to ‘following Jesus every day of the week.’ And not only that, following Jesus every hour of the day, which means then that we need to think about how to follow Jesus at work.

Shiphrah and Puah, Deborah, Ruth – they show us that we can follow Jesus at work by:

1. doing what He would do.
2. giving credit where credit is due. And
3. working hard, whatever you do.

So think about that. You know your workplace (or your school) – what will it look like for you to ‘do what He would do’ in that space? How can you express Jesus’ values and characteristics in your workplace? How can you praise people for the work they’ve done and thank them for their help? How can you apply yourself and integrity and honesty and ‘hardworkingness’ in your workplace?

Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him; we can do that by:

1. doing what He would do.
2. giving credit where credit is due. And
3. working hard, whatever you do.

ⁱ Do you recognize those words ‘they were fruitful and multiplied greatly’? That’s the command that God gave at creation – ‘be fruitful and multiply and steward creation’ – they’re doing what God said to do way, way back in Genesis. So things were good.

ⁱⁱ Two quick observations:

First, what are the midwives’ names? Shiphrah and Puah. What is the pharaoh’s name? We don’t know. The author doesn’t tell us. He has deliberately withheld the pharaoh’s name in order to express their relative importance in God’s eyes. Lowly midwives with no social clout at the bottom of the pecking order? They’re Shiphrah and Puah. Mighty ruler who has the power of life and death in his hands? Who cares! Fame and fortune are nothing to God, faithfulness is and so we know the midwives but not the pharaoh.

Second, I was listening to a lecture series on Egyptian archeology about a year back and the speaker pointed to this passage to say that this is an accurate representation of birthing practices in Egypt. They’ve found these ‘birth stones’ that women in labour would sit on and deliver so just a neat authentication of the accuracy of the Bible. <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-magical-birth-brick/#:~:text=Egyptologists%20have%20long%20known%20that,of%20an%20actual%20birth%20brick>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Are there only two midwives for all of Israel? Probably not; they’re probably representative of the Israelite midwives generally OR it may be that they were the midwives who delivered Moses who wrote it all down.

^{iv} When the pharaoh found out and called them on it, the midwives said to him, verse 19: Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.

Is it possible that the midwives really dragged their feet getting there so that the Hebrew women had time to deliver before they arrived? And is it possible that unlike Egyptian women, who needed a midwife, Hebrew women – moms and daughters and other ladies - were used to delivering each other’s children? Absolutely. It seems to me that these midwives found a legitimate way around their boss’s directives in order to remain faithful to God.

^{vi} 19 When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

20 When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.

21 When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.

22 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.
(Deu 24:19-22 NIV).

^{vii} 9 " 'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

10 Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

(Lev 19:9-10 NIV).

^{viii} It's a neat idea and helpful for us to think about how we might apply that 'gleaning' idea in our own culture. We don't live in an agrarian society any more but it's neat to think – how can we as a culture use a part of our resources to allow those lesser off the opportunity to make a living? In a sense, Ontario Christian Gleaners is doing this – taking the leftovers from grocery stores and farms and making it into food for needy people; Raw Carrot is kind of doing it by making work for people who otherwise wouldn't. I think that there are probably other ways that we could apply this idea of 'gleaning' in our culture, but that's a conversation for another time. Back to Ruth.

^{ix} Theology of Work project, *Women and Work in the Old Testament*, pg. 43.