

Talking About God at Work

A Three-Part Devotional Series Based on Joseph from Genesis 41

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Talking About God at Work, Part 1

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

[Genesis 41:15-16](#)

As one who works in a center belonging to a theological seminary, I talk about God all the time, like in this devotion, for example. Talking about God is both welcome and, indeed, expected of me. Yet, it has not always been this way in my work life. I have been employed in secular contexts where mentioning God was uncommon. Plus, I have friends and colleagues who work in settings where speaking of God is not only unusual, but also unwelcome.



Joseph’s ability to speak of God in a simple, straightforward way, without becoming too preachy or pushy, is something that inspires us today.”

Whether and how we speak of God in such workplaces is not a puzzle to be solved in a single devotion, or even three devotions (which is the number I will devote to this subject this week). Yet, Scripture gives us guidance as we think through this issue. In particular, we have the example of Joseph before Pharaoh.

As you may remember, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, brought to Egypt against his will, and unjustly thrown in jail. While he was imprisoned, God enabled him to interpret a dream of Pharaoh's head cupbearer. Two years later, when Pharaoh had a couple of disturbing dreams that none of his advisers could figure out, the cupbearer told the king about Joseph, who was promptly presented to Pharaoh. Pharaoh explained his situation and said he had heard that Joseph could interpret dreams. Joseph answered: "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (41:16).

The first thing that impresses me about Joseph's mention of God is how simple and straightforward it is. He didn't explain anything about the God he served. He didn't go on about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He simply said, "God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." He did this in a way that seemed natural, honest, and modest. He said what he believed without undue elaboration or defensiveness.

I know Christians who believe it is never appropriate to mention God at work. They may have good reasons for this conviction. But the example of Joseph suggests another possibility. As Al Erisman writes in *The Accidental Executive: Lessons on Business, Faith, and Calling from the Life of Joseph*, "Some might want to keep God out of any conversation in the workplace, arguing for a strict separation of business and faith. But notice what Joseph did and did not do. He was not proselytizing, telling others that they too must believe in God. He simply identified his own position. Even this can be threatening, however, and needs to be done with care. We should acknowledge God in our work, but again we need to be careful in the way we do it."

Of course Joseph's context was different from that of the contemporary workplace in dozens of ways. In particular, he was not in a secular environment, but rather in one populated by various Egyptian gods. Some in ancient Egypt even believed that Pharaoh was divine (or possessed divine powers, at any rate). So, talk of gods (plural) would not be strange in the court of Pharaoh. Talk of a singular God would be unusual if not risky.

So, I am not saying that the example of Joseph is something you must slavishly imitate wherever you work. But I do believe Joseph's ability to speak of God in a simple,

straightforward way, without becoming too preachy or pushy, is something that might inspire us today, even those of us who work in secular workplaces.

I'll have more to say about this tomorrow. For now, let me encourage you to reflect on the following questions.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

What about Joseph's answer to Pharaoh strikes you?

Do you find it natural to speak of God among people who don't share your faith? Why or why not?

Can you imagine times in your work life when you might be able to speak of God in a way that is appropriate and respectful?

PRAYER:

Gracious God, thank you for the simple boldness and clarity of Joseph. Thank you for his example of speaking of you in a work context where mentioning you was unusual if not unwelcome.

Help us, Lord, to be wise in the way we speak of you. May we be honest, clear, and straightforward. May we also be sensitive to those around us and faithful to what our work expects of us.

May all we do in our work today honor you. *Amen.*

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Talking About God at Work, Part 2

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.”

[Genesis 41:25](#)

In [yesterday’s Life for Leaders devotion](#), I began reflecting on the relevance for us of Joseph’s talking about God in his conversation with Pharaoh. As you may recall, when Pharaoh mentioned Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams, Joseph said, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” ([41:16](#)). Then, after Pharaoh explained his dream to Joseph, Joseph brought up God again: “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.”



The examples of Joseph and Paul encourage us to speak of God among our colleagues in a way that honors and involves them, rather than pushing them away.”

Joseph understood that God’s engagement with human beings is not limited to those who have entered into an intentional relationship with the one true God. Rather, God was willing and able to work within Pharaoh for God’s own sovereign purposes. Through dreams, God showed Pharaoh what was about to happen to Egypt, so that Egypt might be prepared for the coming famine.

So, the second time Joseph mentioned God, he did so by pointing to God’s work in Pharaoh’s life. This is striking for several reasons. Listen, once again, to the wise

commentary on this passage by Al Erisman in his book *The Accidental Executive: Lessons on Business, Faith, and Calling from the Life of Joseph*: “Joseph also saw others in his workplace as valued human beings; in fact, they too had insight from God. He said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do” (Genesis 41: 25). Joseph continued this theme in the ensuing conversation, showing respect to Pharaoh.

Joseph’s brief statement of God’s work in Pharaoh reminds me of Paul’s longer statement in [Acts 17](#) on Mars’ Hill (or the Areopagus). There, Paul addressed his pagan audience by affirming their religious sentiments, recognizing that they worshiped as unknown the God proclaimed by Paul, and finding godly wisdom in Greek poetry (Acts 17:22-31). Though Paul did not back away from matters of theological difference with his audience, he sought to emphasize common ground with them.

The examples of Joseph and Paul encourage us to speak of God among our colleagues in a way that honors and involves them, rather than pushing them away. Both of these examples also challenge us to see God’s presence in unexpected places and unexpected people, as God works in and through those who are not in a covenant relationship with him.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

If you work in a setting where some or all of your colleagues are not followers of Jesus, do you believe that God is at work in these coworkers? Can you imagine that God might even reveal something important to one of these colleagues?

When you speak of God, whether at work or any other setting, do you emphasize common ground with others? Or do you emphasize discontinuity and disagreement?

If you have time, read Paul’s speech on Mars’ Hill (Acts 17:22-31). How does this speech challenge and encourage you when you think about speaking of God in your workplace?

PRAYER:

Gracious God, thank you for the examples of Joseph and Paul. Thank you for their ability to see you at work in unexpected ways and unexpected people. Thank you for their affirmation of your presence among these folk.

Help me, Lord, to be discerning and wise. Help me to see where and how you are at work around me. May I learn to speak about you in ways that affirm others even as they affirm your presence in their lives. *Amen.*

Photo “A view of Mars’ Hill in Athens (on the left) from the Parthenon.” Copyright © Mark D. Roberts. Used with permission.

Talking About God at Work, Part 3

It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do.”

[Genesis 41:28](#)

So far this week we've seen in Joseph an example of someone who talked about God in the workplace. He did this in an honest, straightforward, and humble way. Moreover, Joseph acknowledged that he did not have a lock on God's revelation. He stated that "God revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do" (41:25). In other words, God was also at work in Pharaoh, not just in Joseph.



When we talk about God, we must examine the motivations of our hearts, lest we try to use God to promote our own agendas rather than God's own agenda.”

After interpreting Pharaoh's dream with God's help, Joseph again spoke of God's revelation to the king: "God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do" ([41:28](#)). In this particular context, such language is not manipulative, since Joseph was hardly in a place to use his talk of God to force Pharaoh's hand.

But, suppose the situation is different. Suppose that the one speaking of God's revelation is a person of considerable authority, while the one hearing is subordinate to that person. It's not hard to imagine how a person in power could use "God talk" to intimidate others. If, for example, a senior pastor of a megachurch says, "God told me to do this," it would be difficult for anyone loyal to or subordinate to that pastor to disagree.

Again, we turn to Al Erisman for wisdom about this situation. In his book *The Accidental Executive: Lessons on Business, Faith, and Calling from the Life of Joseph*, Al writes: “Although Joseph was right to attribute his interpretations to God, we need to be careful not to let what should be an expression of humility turn into a way of boosting our own authority. There is a fine line between giving God credit and claiming special insight. The danger here is that we might be tempted to use the claim of having special insight from God to challenge any disagreement with our supposed special revelation. Too often we may want to credit God to win an argument, while God really has nothing to do with our position.”

Al’s caution is wise, though it may not be relevant to many secular work environments today. Still, we who speak of God must do so with utmost humility, rather than with the kind of swagger that marks the behavior of some Christians who are sure that God is always on their side. Moreover, when we talk about God, we must examine the motivations of our hearts, lest we try to use God to promote our own agendas rather than God’s own agenda.

In my own pastoral experience, there were times when I was convinced God had shown me how he wanted to guide the church I was leading. Yet, as I shared this with my elders, I did not usually say, “God told me to do this so we had better do it.” Rather, I tried to say something like, “As I have prayed about this, I have come to believe that this is what God wants for us. But I need your wisdom and discernment to know whether I have heard God correctly.” Often, in the ensuing discussion, my basic sense of God’s direction would be confirmed, but there would be crucial and valuable modifications that came from the input of others. Our church would have been weakened if I had been so strong in my claim about God’s guidance that I shut the door to corporate discernment.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Have you ever been in a conversation when someone used “God talk” to try and force an agenda or manipulate you? How did you respond?

Have you ever done something like this?

If you strongly believe God has spoken to you, how can you communicate your conviction in a way that respects the discernment responsibility of the body of Christ?

PRAYER:

Gracious God, how thankful we are that you speak to your people, including us. Thank you for guiding us today through your Word and by your Spirit. Thank you for giving us members of your family who can help us discern what you are saying. Help us, Lord, not to use you or your name as a way of advancing our own personal agenda. Give us humility of heart and humility of speech. May all we do and say be for your glory, not our own. *Amen.*

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