

The Accidental Executive

Albert M Erisman, *The Accidental Executive. Lessons on Business, Faith and Calling from the Life of Joseph Peabody, Mass.*: Hendrickson, 2015. ISBN 978-1-61970-621-7

Lurking behind this enigmatic title, *The Accidental Executive*, is an excellent commentary on the Joseph Saga in Genesis 37-50.

Exploring this familiar Bible story from the perspective of work and especially business corporations, the author offers the reader new insights and ways of hearing God's word for us through this saga.

The opening chapter very clearly sets out the themes and structure of the book.

The author recognises two very different periods in Joseph's working life: 1) at the bottom, a slave and a prisoner with no choice in what he did; 2) a national leader, second only to Pharaoh, where he accomplished the major task of saving a civilisation from starvation.

There are a number of lessons that can be found within the story, which the author helpfully applies to modern businesses and their executives. Erisman uses interviews and examples from the experiences of business people, well-known and not so well known, together with his own experiences in a major corporation to illustrate each point that is explored.

The author suggests that we can learn from Joseph's character: dealing with the moral questions related to work - money, sex, and power; the need for courage in difficult situations; and wisdom in handling success. Erisman stresses that it can be easy to fail when things are going well, for then we may cease to depend on God in the ways we did when times were difficult. The danger is that we may become self-confident and arrogant. For the author, in success Joseph remains connected to God, he remains rooted in who he is, and he makes a clear distinction between the work he needed to do and the trappings associated with that work.

Erisman notes that we can learn from Joseph's insights into leadership. Joseph focuses on his one goal, which is to save the world from starvation. This needed perseverance and endurance - the years of plenty were successfully completed, but then comes the more challenging problems presented by the years of famine. Joseph seeks to be fair and just in his dealings with all those who come for grain. They buy the grain with their savings, then they sell their land and eventually themselves to Pharaoh - they become a slave nation. But then Joseph gives them grain to plant and grow crops with the agreement that 20% of the produce is paid to Pharaoh. We may feel uncomfortable with this approach to giving aid to the starving, but maybe, like gleaning, this allows people to retain their dignity. But, for Joseph the decisions are always Pharaoh's and Joseph never uses his position to accumulate personal wealth. Throughout, Joseph is presented as a leader of integrity.

Finally, the author suggests that the Joseph saga provides insights into the big questions for people in business such as: finding a career, seeing meaning in our work, building a bridge between faith and work, dealing with the personal effects of success and failure. Erisman emphasises the importance of integrity - an integrated life: living the same life at work and at home; maintaining the same values; integrating faith and work.

Our author points to what I believe is the key verse in the whole saga: *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives* (Genesis 50:20). Joseph sees his life, good, bad and indifferent, as meaningful and in response to the call of God. Although not being able to choose *what* he did, he did choose *how* he would do it (page 169).

In his final reflections Erisman observes how the story, which was familiar to him as a child, reveals new truths in later life. His own experiences through a career in business and then as an academic looking at faith and work issues have added a rich interpretive lens to the Joseph saga, which he shares with the reader.

I commend this text to Bible scholars, teachers and preachers, and many in business who are looking for ways to understand the outworking of their faith in the difficult, challenging and demanding situations faced in the business world.

