

Emails from the Hotel Babylon

Subtitle: How to live in sin and get away with it -

This is a summary list of a series of emails sent out from September 2001 until now entitled Emails from the Hotel Babylon. The emails are written by Mike a travelling business man who stays in the Hotel Babylon whatever country he happens to be working in. He emails his colleague Rob with progress updates and in every email draws on a Bible story or passage as he continues to integrated his faith with his work. The emails cover a range of issues relating spirituality to life in the workplace. The series is intended to cover the wicked cities of the Bible using stories and teaching by people living in them or writing to people living in them. Mike's interpretations of the Bible passages is usually unconventional. This is quite deliberate to force those discussing the issues to move beyond platitudes to sharing their experiences at work and to look at how the Bible relates to these. These studies are not intended to be safe. They are open ended and the discussion will go on long after the meeting has ended.

The emails are intended to be distributed up to a week before the meeting at which the questions are discussed. There is a Bible passage or two focusing on a wicked city in the Bible used as a source for each email, which should also be read before or at the meeting.

The purpose of the studies is to look at the biblical teaching around cities portrayed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures as wicked. Rather than skirting around them or assuming that these are places believers should avoid - the book takes each city in turn and proposes how believers can and should go about living in them as witnesses.

1. Egypt- God and management - the Joseph effect - how to forecast 7 years of famine and supply a business plan with it
2. Babylon -Using prayer to work more effectively.
3. Sodom and Gomorrah - Forgetting which side you're on OR the loneliness of the long distance negotiator.
4. Moses - when the client doesn't want to listen
5. Tyre - Blinded by success. Ezekiel on the Phoenicians
6. Babel - divided by a common language: ambition the grand project
7. Samaria - Worshipping the Baal - Religion that pays
8. Curtains for Jerusalem - Religion is bad for you - according to Jesus
9. Nineveh - Projection: Jonah and unforeseen and unwanted repentance
10. Colosse - Corporate accountability: everything in its proper place
11. Rome - The Powers That Be: God's servants?
12. Babylon 2 - Saying no at any cost
13. Corinth - Tearing castles down
14. Babylon 3 - The Great Whore: are my hands clean?

Post Cards from Babylon

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How to use them

This is a précis of the topics discussed in those emails. The emails should be distributed up to a week before the meeting at which the questions are discussed. There is a Bible passage or two focusing on a wicked city in the Bible used as a source for each email, which should also be read before or at the meeting. It is hoped that the material is open and provocative enough that non Christians as well as Christians should find it helpful.

Email 1 The Joseph Effect: When having faith makes you better at your job

Resume

Mike emails Rob to fill him in on the pitch presentation he made that morning. It becomes evident that a keystone of the successful presentation came from a chance encounter en route to the presentation involving turning car park ticket vending machines into instant win gaming machines in a bid to encourage more people to visit shopping centres.

Themes

- the 'Joseph effect' - that those who have a relationship with God have an inside track that makes them more effective at work and more alert to nuances in situations that they can use to advantage in their work. Example given is Joseph's improvised business plan when all he was requested to do was to interpret a dream
- that everyone at work is involved in compromise of one kind or another. The example given is Joseph's enslaving of the Egyptians in exchange for food.

Relevant Bible passages: Genesis 41:1-40 and commentary Gen 47:13-22

Questions

1. Is there a Joseph effect? Or is there no connection between the spiritual and the material?
2. How do we become more aware of the connection?
3. How are we involved in compromise in our workplace? Can compromise be eliminated? Or can it just be minimised?

Email 2: Daniel: Using prayer to work more effectively

Resume

Mike emails Rob again asking him to make contact with the manufacturers of the car park machines in Taiwan to discuss modifications. Needs some material to convince his client that progress is being made. Impression given is that Mike is covering all the angles because he is prepared. Mike remembers to ensure that Rob gets home to his wife in reasonable time.

Themes

- Business effectiveness can be linked to meditative prayer that anticipates the plan for the day and reviews what was achieved at the end of the day
- Suggestion that God is like a ref not rigging the game but improvising constantly to improve the flow of the game

Relevant Bible passages: Daniel 6 - lions den, Daniel 9 meeting with Gabriel following fasting and prayer.

Questions

1. What difference can preparation for and reviewing of work make? Why is this?
2. What does God bring to the party? How can prayer help us engage with work?
3. Is God a ref? If so what is his remit?

Also included with this mailing was the Daniel Day (but not Lewis) Plan which has a series of questions to be used in prayer at the start of the day and at the end of the day. It is suggested that the group meets before the day starts and again at the end to pray through their working days together

Email 3: Sodom and Gomorrah: Forgetting whose side you're on? OR The loneliness of the long distance negotiator.

Resume

Mike emails Rob from Eilat where they have gone for the weekend for some R&R. He has been feeling more and more isolated as the negotiations have proceeded so a weekend in the fleshpot seemed a good idea. There are complications and Mike starts to realise that he is beginning to forget which side he's on.

Themes

- Living on the boundaries. Explores where you should be operating from, within your safety zone or taking risks.
- The effect of being isolated at work

Bible Passages: Genesis 13, 18, 19

Questions

1. Should Mike tell his wife about what happened?
2. Who you think did more for Sodom, Abraham who pleaded unsuccessfully to save it or Lot because he lived there?
3. What kinds of boundaries do you set for yourself?
4. Should you take care to live well within your boundaries or should you live on the edge?

Email 4: Moses: When the client doesn't want to listen....

Resume

An exercise in brinkmanship when the client offers a much worse deal on a take it or leave it basis. Mike feels totally unsupported by his own management in New York. He decides to bluff it out.

Themes

- The basis for negotiation and brokering deals
- Doing nothing as positive action

Bible Passage: Exodus 5

Questions:

1. Should negotiation be win win or is that just a loser's perspective?
2. Why do you think Moses message was so uncompromising - guaranteed to get a negative response from Pharaoh?
3. Is Mike right to compare himself with Moses? Is there any connection between negotiating for the freedom of a people and cutting a business deal? Is God involved in both and how?
4. Do you act ever by not acting - by holding your position? What qualities help you do this?

Email 5: Tyre: Success can make you blind

Resume

Mike's bluff worked. He got what he wanted. Now he's flown to New York to visit his head office en route to the client's head office in Chicago. He reflects on the assumption in the New York office that they are running the world from there. It is evident from a comment from his wife that Mike himself has lost perspective - and that the perceived importance of the job isn't as great as he perhaps imagines.

Themes

- Keeping things in perspective - the little people often have a better perspective than the people at the top
- Maintaining relationships with people you don't trust

Bible Passage: Exekiel 27(*If you want to check the passage you will find it in Ezekiel 27 though the whole of Ezek 26-28 is worth reading through. Also if you have the time Revelation 18. Ezekiel's take on Tyre was a big influence on the apostle John*).

Questions

1. How do you treat colleagues you feel you can't trust?
2. Do you think the bottom up perspective is more valid than top down, less valid or just another perspective?
3. Is success dangerous? Does it blind us? If so how does it affect us?
4. How do we keep grounded? Whose opinions do we value and why?
5. Are you involved in global business? How do you take the little people into account?

Email 6: Babel: Divided by a common language....

Resume

Mike emails Rob having flown on to the Chicago office to meet with the CEO of the client and to RDV with the Chicago sister agency who will be fielding a liaison team which Mike in theory heads up. Predictably Mike locks horns with the local management on how to move forward. While on the surface Mike and Chuck are trying to deliver what the client wants, they each have their own conflicting agendas. How is co-operation to be fostered and developed at work particularly across cultures?

Themes

- Co-operation: it's maintenance and limitations
- Building relationships across cultures

Bible Passage: *If you want to check the passage the Babel story is in Genesis 11:1-9.*

Questions

1. What examples can you recall of non-communication and non co-operation at work? To what would you attribute these?
2. Are there limits to co-operation? Are there ways we can overcome them?
3. How do you keep ambition in check? When does ambition become damaging and destructive?

Email 7: Samaria: Religion that pays....

Resume

Lester the client is now trying to ease the promotion past the last hurdle opposition on religious grounds from shareholders namely his mother! He takes Mike off to a Christian Businessman's dinner where there are a number of speeches giving the clear impression that if you do or don't do certain things you will be financially rewarded by God. It is a very American strain of Christianity that Mike reacts against because it makes faith in God mechanical, contractual and self-interested.

Themes

- Prosperity and whether faith guarantees it
- The nature of belief in God - is it contractual with obligations on both sides

Bible Passage: If you want to check the passage you will find it in I Kings 16:29-17:7; and whole of 1 Kings 18. If you want to do some homework check out Hosea 2 where there is a deliberate and dangerous parallel drawn between the Baal the husband and God the husband. The Israelites would have used the same name for Baal and God. Was God's relationship with Israel unconditional - a husband who would take his wife back or would God as the offended lord and master of the house kick Israel out? Hosea 2:16 is a key verse.

Questions

1. Does faith in God deliver material blessings or not?
2. What is wrong with formulaic faith? Surely a deal is a deal and if you believe in God you're entitled to something in return.
3. If you integrate your faith with your work what difference will it make to your lifestyle and your standard of living?

Email 8: Jerusalem: Priest turned prostitute....

Resume

Lester the client takes Mike down to Atlanta for a meeting with his mother (a majority shareholder) and her pastor. They are concerned that the promotion is about gambling. It becomes very evident that what all are searching for is an accommodation which will satisfy the religious concerns while ensuring that commercial objectives are met. Mike is less than co-operative with what he perceives to be hypocrisy and the whole project is put on hold.

Themes

- Applying religion to work - how far do you go?
- Abuse of power - what if others don't share your convictions?
- Double standards - do they matter?

Bible Passage: There are a number of passages about the bigotry of Jerusalem. Start with Jesus words in Matthew 23:37-39 which are the culmination of his tirade against the religious leaders through the whole of the chapter. If you have time check out Isaiah 1:21-26

Questions

1. Do religion and business go together or should they be kept apart?
2. Does religious practice have to be consistent or should we tolerate the inconsistencies out of respect for people's culture?
3. How far should religious people go in forcing others to comply with their beliefs?
4. How do you treat people at work from different religious backgrounds? The same or any different? Why is this?

Email 9: Nineveh: When the wrong people say sorry....

Resume

Mike has flown back to New York in disgrace to see his boss. Saul Klingman. Actually the US agency team are quite pleased about the outcome because the setback reduces Mike's power base and might allow the promotional idea to be sold to other clients of the agency network. Mike goes out for a consolation dinner with Klingman which takes an unexpected turn when Klingman breaks down and asks for prayer. What follows is a kind of conversion for Klingman much to Mike's discomfiture because he really doesn't like him!

Themes

- Prejudice about the kind of people who are pre-disposed to believe and those who are not
- The effect of difficult working relationships on our perceptions of people

Bible Passage: Jonah should be short enough to read through quickly. 4 short chapters. The book is intended to be satirical; Jonah is the bigot here! Is his prayer inside the whale genuine or is his high flown rhetoric a bit of a send up? How would you pray in a whale?!

Questions

1. On what basis do you perceive people to be close or distant from God?
2. Think back on times when you have been close to God or far away. How aware have other people been of what was going on inside you?
3. What should you do about people you dislike at work?

Email 10: Colosse: Corporate Accountability – everything in it's proper place

Resume

Mike has been sent to a ranch in California to sell the idea to the proprietor of a chain of health clubs located in shopping malls. It becomes evident that The real money is less in the gyms than in the cosmetic surgery operation alongside. And this leads him to look at Colossians and the thought that all ideas have their place in Christ but that without his restraining influence ideas will always dehumanise people. Which leaves Mike wondering how to pull out of the deal and keep his job

Themes

- The effect the big ideas in our culture have on people - how to counteract the dehumanising effects
- The relationship between Jesus in his divinity and humanity and the big ideas
- How to make companies accountable for the ideas they use to promote themselves

Bible Passage: Colossians 1:15-20

Questions

1. Do the controlling ideas in our culture dehumanise us? What examples can you think of? What do you do about values which you disagree with and find unhelpful?
2. How does Christ humanise values? Isn't it the case that there are churches and denominations whose values have a negative effect? What about them?
3. How effective are you at confronting the real issues at work and being frank with your misgivings?

Email 11: Romans: The Powers that be – God's servants?

Resume

Mike and his wife Jan are treated to a day trip by executive jet over Silicon Glen and up to Seattle. All of which triggers a debate about whether corporations have become the new powers that be and whether a company is a servant of God. Things are hotting up on the negotiation front but perhaps it's the calm before the storm.

Themes

- The effect the big ideas in our culture have on people - how to counteract the dehumanising effects
- The relationship between Jesus in his divinity and humanity and the big ideas
- How to make companies accountable for the ideas they use to promote themselves

Bible Passage: Romans 13 1:1-6

Questions

1. What is the relationship between God and the powers that be?
2. Do you accept Mike's extrapolation that now corporations are taking over this role from governments? Why?
3. Who is accountable for the values being espoused by major corporations - their leaders, the media who promote them governments for legislating what can and cannot be done or consumers who buy what they produce?
4. Can a company be a servant of God? How does a good servant behave?
5. Do you pray for your country? Do you pray for your company? What's the difference? What should you pray for?

Email 12: Babylon 2: Saying no at any cost

Resume

Mike who has misgivings about the client's business is forced into a corner. So he walks out - he has a shouting match by video link with his boss Saul Kleinman in New York. He threatens resignation and is given one more chance to sell the promotion. All of this is deeply unsettling to his wife Jan who he has to put on a plane back to London. Which raises issues about when we should refuse to compromise even if this affects people who depend on us

Themes

- When should you refuse to compromise
- The rights of the individual versus the rights of the company
- The impact of our decisions on those who depend on us

Bible Passage: Daniel 3 whole chapter

Questions

1. What areas in your place of work would you define as no go resignation areas?
2. Do you think we can extrapolate from the story about the 3 friends to a general work situation? Why?
3. Have you ever said no?
4. Is there a way of saying no? How can we refuse graciously?
5. On what grounds can you put your own principles before those of the company you work for? Is it OK to delegate it to some one else in the same company so you don't have to do it?
6. If our own principles have an adverse effect on others such as our family do you think we owe it to them to compromise?

Email 13: Corinth: Tearing castles down

Resume

Mike en route to Karachi emails his wife Jan to try to explain his decision. He is up against a deadline - he will almost certainly lose his job if he doesn't manage to get a very rapid deal in Pakistan and Saul Kleinman himself is hotfooting it to California to try to patch up things with Ralph and close the original deal there. Mike tries to reassure his wife that his work needs to come from conviction and that he couldn't be an accessory to a scheme that would build up Ralph's cosmetic surgery business. He uses the passage in Corinthians to try to explain how a pocket of resistance can become a stronghold that becomes impossible to winkle out - there is something extreme about his unwillingness to compromise but time is running out.

Themes

- The significance of our work when much of it is disposable
- The limits of our responsibility for our work
- When our work needs protecting from those who would spoil it and misuse it

Bible Passage: 2 Corinthians 10:1-8

Questions

1. What are the limits of your responsibility at work? At point can you say it is no longer my problem?
2. Is your work important? Do you think it matters to God?
3. How do you cope with the disposability of much office work? Is that a problem for you? Do you pray the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90:17 establish the work of our hands.
4. What is there in your work which is lasting?
5. When Paul talks about pulling down strongholds in the Corinthian passage what strongholds is he talking about? How does he do it?
6. What strongholds are you aware of that you ought to pull down - and are there any in the workplace? Is this personal or do you have a responsibility to others to do this?
7. There's a danger that Mike is rather taking matters into his own hands. Is he right to take such a strong line? When is it appropriate to be confrontational and when to be conciliatory?

Email 14: Babylon 3: The Great Whore – are my hands clean?

Resume

Mike is sorting out the deal with Zafar as fast as he can and despite Zafar's concerns Mike has to rush him to beat Saul Kleinman. But in the meantime Mike has become distracted by a chance encounter with an Islamic extremist he strikes up a conversation with in a street café. It becomes evident that this extremist, educated in the West has a clear understanding of the kind of work Mike is engaged in but regards him as the enemy and his

work as evil western colonialism. Mike confused and shaken retreats to his hotel room to try to think things through. The passage he uses is from Revelation 17 where all the peoples of the world are portrayed as a prostitute. He is starting to realise that he may be one of the bad guys. The key question in this study is whether anyone can really know which side they're on and whether their motives are above question.

Themes

- Whether it is possible to do work that doesn't involve moral compromise.
- Are companies irredeemable?
- How to be fair in a global economy where there is a huge gap between the powerful and the powerless

Bible Passage: Revelation 17 whole chapter

Questions to consider

Read through the verses of Revelation 17 whole chapter

1. As an exercise could you write down on one side of a sheet of paper all the good things your organisation does for society in its work? On the other side write down the bad effects of what your company does. How much of your time and the company's time is given to each of the items on both sides of your piece of paper. Why is this?
2. Could Mike still pull out of the deal if it went against his convictions and still be a good employee?
3. Do you agree with Mike's pessimistic view that it's not possible to have clean hands?
4. How as a Christian is it possible to live in a global economy where there is such a divide between the powerful and the powerless. What should our response be?
5. Are our organisations irredeemable? What can we do about it?
6. What is your responsibility as a Christian to your colleagues? What is your responsibility as a Christian for your organisation?
7. Now you have completed the series, how would you characterise a Christian's responsibilities to be a Christian at work. Should you be fully engaged, detached or semi detached?!

Emails from Hotel Babylon 1

The Joseph effect: God and work

Hi Rob. I thought I'd bash you out something at end of play - we got back from dinner at 11 but the jet lag has cut in so I know I won't be able to sleep. Hotel Babylon is living up to it's name - looks fantastic in the brochure - all the blurb about refined, comfortable environments in which to make executive decisions - actually the air con is dire and it overlooks a panel beating shop but business is like that: the mundane peeping out from under the façade.

I was intrigued by your cryptic comment last week about spirituality and leaving it on the hook at the door when you get to work. Were you serious? I think it's part and parcel of everything you do whether you want to admit it or not. I don't mean the kind of aqualung that some religious types seem to adopt which seems to involve mostly holding their breath and coming up for a gulp of clean air occasionally. That's a cheat, trying to be in two places at once and failing dismally at being in either. For me spirituality should be seamless.

I often think about Joseph, you know, as in Technicolor Dreamcoat - being performed in a primary school somewhere round the world every 30 seconds. Pharoah has a terrifying dream and knows it means something but he doesn't know what. And the more he worries the more he becomes infuriated by the inability of anyone around him to come up with the answer. Eventually one of his staff reveals that while doing a spot of time in the guardhouse having incurred Pharoah's displeasure, he met a prisoner who could interpret dreams and had correctly interpreted his own dream that he would be freed. This turns out to be Joseph who is whisked from the prison into the palace told a dream all about fat cows and thin cows and the fat ones being eaten by the thin ones.

Instantly Joseph delivers a slick interpretation: it's all about famine looming after 7 years of plenty. What follows is much more intriguing than the interpretation. Joseph goes on without taking so much as a breath to tell the king he needs a strategy: to gather the surplus a full 7 years ahead of the famine, a new storage system to hold it all and a new management system to pull it all together. Pharoah doesn't hesitate. The new boy gets the gig.

So where did the business plan come from? There's no indication that the solution was part of the brief. He was asked to interpret the dream not solve the problem of world hunger. But he went for it. And he **was** qualified. Not only had he started as a slave in Egypt and worked his way to running his masters household. By all accounts he ended up running the prison. What intrigues me is that these days anyone with a gift for understanding dreams and the wisdom to see stuff that nobody else does, would normally present themselves as a religious figure. And while they might win a little respect,

their advice would be treated as a special case and their services ultimately dispensed with. But you can't write off Joseph so easily.

And he delivered. Not only did Pharaoh get his new bumper harvests, his barns and his management structure, his dreamer turns out to be a schemer who changes the political landscape. Pharaoh was just the king. There was an aristocracy. By all accounts there was a middle class. At least that is until the famine started. But when the people ran out of food Joseph was ruthless. He took their money till it was gone. He took the livestock. And when all that was gone he enslaved the population. There were to be no free lunches. And by the end of the 7 lean years the whole of Egypt was in Pharaoh's pocket.

Pharaoh owed Joseph his whole kingdom. Not a democrat then, but very shrewd and very effective. And what are we to make of his handing out of food to his brothers when they turned up in Egypt? Was it humanitarian or was he extending the influence of Pharaoh across to the East? Love him or loathe him he saved Egypt. If 7 years of surpluses had been squandered in importing luxury goods and tipping the balance of trade for short term gain Egypt would have collapsed. I admire Joseph, though I don't know if I like him very much.

Joseph would have found the separation of the spiritual from the material world bizarre. He evidently felt that he had more to offer than interpreting dreams. He had the ability to make things happen. And he seems to have seen his job as a vocation given by God. As he said to his brothers who had enslaved him and sent him packing to Egypt: "you meant it for evil but God meant it for good." And Pharaoh was of a similar opinion.

Which long preamble brings me to a question. Is there a Joseph effect? If someone is spiritually alive do they have resources which enable them to make connections, to get to the real issues faster than those who have neglected to cultivate the spiritual? Part of me wants to say no - that the spiritual is personal and private and far removed from what I do. But that just cannot be true. God is as plugged into political and business realities as to any other kind of reality. What trips us up is the fear that bringing the spiritual and the material together will turn us into a kind of mad mullah whose pronouncements have no basis in reality. I believe there is a Joseph effect. We just have to learn to look for it. The separation between the spiritual and the material in the West has forced us to deny the relationship. But it is there.

Enough sermonising. Listen Rob I need you to get onto something. The initial meeting today went very well - but I have to admit I floated an idea I haven't any foundation for and as often happens it is those which fly and then there's a panic nailing it down. It's all about using the data storage on plastic tokens used for in car park machines. Basically every token stores the time you dropped off the car, but there's no reason you couldn't store a whole lot more data. Every car park machine is potentially a gaming machine making travelling and shopping a whole lot more interesting. The

idea came about because my flight out was delayed by a few minutes and I found myself in the queue for the coffee machine with an old boy who was on his way out to some kind of timeshare in Marbella. He was a semi retired draughtsman who designs stuff for car parks. He didn't know much about the capacity of the chips in the tokens but on the strength of what he told me I thought it was worth dropping into the meeting. The client is hot to trot on this so we need some answers fast and as you know I won't be back till Friday pm. Can you get on the phone to the car park company and find out who makes the machines? Otherwise send Kath down to Heathrow to get details of the machine - short term car park terminal 4) This could be a big one. Maybe we should drop everything and form a company that sells space on the counters. Could make a fortune!

Anyway that's enough for now. Must turn in. Car will be here at 7.

Mike

Questions to consider

Relevant Bible passages: Genesis 41:1-40 and commentary Gen 47:13-22

4. Is there a Joseph effect? Or is there no connection between the spiritual and the material?
5. How do we become more aware of the connection?
6. How are we involved in compromise in our workplace? Can compromise be eliminated? Or can it just be minimised?

Briefing to group leader

This first email in the series starts with a head-on question: does faith make you more effective in your job or not. Secularism would suggest that what you believe is irrelevant to your performance at work (and unconsciously I suspect we mostly subscribe to this view). A Pietistic world view might even suggest that someone with a faith actually performs WORSE at work than average because of persecution and misunderstanding from colleagues and from demonic interference. Using the Joseph passage the implication of Mike's email is that someone with faith in God has an inside track that makes them perform better because they have been equipped for years for the calling they find themselves in and can be more perceptive to opportunities and happenstances as they occur.

The second major theme of this mailing is the issue of compromise. The writer of Genesis 47's postscript on the Joseph story is implicitly critical of Joseph's tactics. He may have saved Egypt from famine but at the price of mortgaging everyone up to Pharaoh. Joseph neatly creates the possibility of Exodus: a tyrannical Pharaoh who enslaves and oppresses with impunity. Is it possible for a Christian to work without compromising their faith. The gambling promotion which Mike is developing is quite deliberately chosen as a controversial but not untypical example.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 2

Daniel: Using prayer to work more effectively

Hi Rob - thanks for getting onto the car parks thing. I expected the car park people to be a bit obstructive - but we need to get onto the people in Taiwan who make the machines. Gaming is hampered by the cost of security, card readers and the rest. This could take the costs right down and make the whole thing much simpler. The last thing we want is the people running the car park clocking what we're up to and cutting us out of the loop. Client is still gagging for it and asking for details. Naturally I'm frantically backpeddling and trying to refocus on the other stuff we presented cos if we can't deliver then we'll have to let him down gently. I've just been on the phone to Jan for an hour. She's fine but one of the kids is down with flu and her day went completely to pot. One of these situations where it's nobody's fault but you know it's gonna cost you a load of marital airmiles when you get home!!

Wow you DID get a bee in your bonnet over the Joseph thing. And I admit it can be a bit surreal sitting here in a hotel ruminating about an Egyptian civil servant from X years BC. But I think we're on to something. I take your point about the dreams thing. Without it he wouldn't have even got close to the palace. But I repeat that was the pretext. What he did when he got in front of Pharoah is totally familiar to us - he hustled! And he made the sale!

Look I'll give you another example - another one straight out of Sunday School. Daniel - the one in the lion's den. Like Joseph he's from out of town. Like Joseph he rose to the highest office. But he never compromised on his core beliefs and he practiced them faithfully whatever the schedule. There were a number of things he did. But what got him into trouble eventually was his prayer life. Basically he prayed 3 times a day. Without fail. Now when Sunday School teachers and the clergy get to this it all gets very pious. The usual take out is - What a good man he was we should all pray more with a spin about how lucky we are to have freedom to practice our faith, think of all the countries where...etc so we all go home to Sunday lunch feeling guilty about SOMETHING. But it's tosh. If you look at the book of Daniel in the Bible you get an insight into the content of his prayers. And it is mind blowing.

Daniel's prayers are about politics. He is preoccupied with the State he is working for and also for the future of his own people now in exile. But his scope is not at all pious and personal. He looks at the international stage, depicts it as a series of titanic struggles between mythical beasts and in doing so demonstrates a whole new way of looking at how countries interact. Like Joseph Daniel had a gift for understanding dreams and visions. But he didn't just interpret for other people (though he did), he had visions of his own. And he kept having them. The hyper-reality that Daniel inhabits is ongoing. There are a series of visions recorded in the book of Daniel and this from a civil service mandarin putting in 15 hour days! This scope is more

than a contemporary look at the superpowers of his time. Daniel gets into some scenario planning which reaches forward centuries to the expansion of Greece with Alexander the Great and then the Romans. But what we are looking at here is not someone cut off from the political process fantasising about it, but someone at the heart of politics. But lets get practical here. The man was hard at work but aided and facilitated by his prayer life which was regular and dominant. Three times a day - a punishing routine so intrusive that it was the only thing his enemies were able to pick up on in order to undermine his standing with the king - which they then did hence the lion's den story.

This man prepares for his work with prayer at the start of the day, he finishes the day with prayer, and he needs a midday prayer time to keep on track. Now maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he's an intensely religious person who prays whenever possible like a drowning man coming up for air. But I don't think so. So I have started trying to follow suit. And it is hard. I think of prayer as a series of thankyou's, please's and bless me's with no connection to effectiveness of the work I am taking on. Every situation has a dynamic based on people and processes. While we normally attempt to change these in situ, you know that very often it is about the state of mind people are in and their attitudes towards one another that can be critical. Preparation for work and reviewing of work are rarely done in any depth. We rehearse presentations, we have status meetings to look for wheels coming off and to pin blame when wheels are well and truly rolling away from the car! But there is so much more to do that affects people which bringing them and the situations before God.

And I find myself asking does God have an agenda here or does he act like ref in the thick of the action but keeping out of the way of the ball? What does God think about what is happening? Is he keeping things running smoothly, is he trying to lift the level of play, or has he rigged the game?

Reviewing is just as important. Meanings change under pressure. You know what it's like being out of the office for a few days and how much things can move on even though you were being kept up to speed from a distance, and you are coming from behind just because you weren't there to live through it. And in all of that we can miss the big picture, as things subtly change. And while the journey is thrilling we can forget where we were originally headed and why. I take great comfort from the fact that after every day of creation God reviewed his work, he didn't just put it on hold until the next day. There's far more weight in the creation story given to reviews than plans. Perhaps that's how our universe was made. Raw improvisation with constant checks on the state of progress!

To turn to less elevated matters I think I can keep the client happy but his impatience will need to be contained. If you could work towards a conference call for the day after tomorrow with the people in Taiwan. But for tomorrow I need stuff - I can get some bits and pieces off their website to use but what I've seen is bit flimsy. Can you get some documentation of them in say pdf format, that will reproduce well and gives a bit of weight to

the proposal. As for costs; I'm just going to have to go on bluffing till you and Steve have got a handle on the numbers.

Phew!! And do get home yourself before 8. I can't be home tonight but there's no reason why you can't get home to Nancy. I don't want to be attributable cause!

Over and out

Mike

Questions to consider

Relevant Bible passages: Daniel 6 - lions den, Daniel 9 meeting with Gabriel following fasting and prayer.

4. What difference can preparation for and reviewing of work make? Why is this?
5. What does God bring to the party? How can prayer help us engage with work?
6. Is God a ref? If so what is his remit?

Briefing to group leader

This email moves on to consider how someone with faith can be more effective at work and draws on the example of Daniel as a high ranking civil servant in the Babylonian administration. Rather than separating out Daniel's role as a God fearing non conformist from his calling to be an apocalyptic visionary the email suggests that Daniel's pattern of regular prayer and reflection meant that he was given a deep insight into the political present and future of the world he was working in. The email has an attachment called the Daniel Day plan which provides a pattern for anticipating the day's events in prayer and reviewing the day in retrospect to understand the key events better. It is suggested that the group might try to use this pattern together at the start of the day and at the end. (And for the keen ones some might follow Daniel's full pattern and meet for prayer midday as well!)

The second major theme of the email is to ask what God's role is in the middle of a working day. Is God largely absent - a critic or help desk? Or is God like a referee - totally involved and improving the quality of gameplay but without fixing the game!

The Daniel Day (but not Lewis) Plan

Morning

The urgent versus the important.

Start with what is important.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

1. What big picture stuff needs addressing today?
2. For whom are you responsible and what can you do today to fulfil that responsibility and leave them better supported than this time yesterday?
3. For what are you responsible and what can you do today to fulfil that responsibility and leave them better supported than this time yesterday?
4. Where do you see God's kingdom and order coming in your life today?
5. Bring the important things you have identified to God. Pray them through while watching for changes in their perceived importance and urgency.

Turning to the urgent

In your mind split the absolutely urgent (must be done today) from the rest.

How are you going to get the urgent done?

How can you stop new urgencies derailing the extreme urgent stuff you have just identified?

Bring extreme urgent things in front of God. What does God perceive as urgent? Why is this?

Pray them through while watching for changes in their perceived urgency.

Pray for the protection of the urgent to ensure that the urgent actually gets done.

Prepare for the contingency of the urgent not getting done. What happens next?

People

Pray for the people you have to deal with today with both the important and the urgent things you have to do. What is important to them? What urgencies will drive them? How does God feel about these? If God calls you to be a person who serves and is merciful to others, how do you perceive this working itself out today?

Evening review

Play back the day in your mind: what happened.

Play back the day as a history book. What was historic?

Play back the day as a list of activities: what important stuff got accomplished

Play back the day as soap opera. Who were the main characters? How did the plot develop? Did the day centre around you?

Play back the day as gospel. What was God up to? Where was God?

Pray first for situations brought to mind from the first playback

Pray next for the important stuff (cf Psalm 90:17 the prayer of Moses

Establishing the work you do) and diminishing the stuff that wasn't helpful.

Pray next for the activity list asking God to help you judge whether what needed to be done was done.

Pray for the people you were with today. Ephesians talks about God having prepared the things we are to do. Pray about the scripts people have to work to tomorrow as a consequence of what has happened today.

Pray about the increasing of God's rule and kingdom as a consequence of all the things that happened today good and bad.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 3

Sodom and Gomorrah: Whose side are you on?

Hi Rob, I'm emailing you from the fleshpots - Eilat to be precise - not quite Sodom or Gomorrah but as good as. And it's a ruddy sight more comfortable than being in a spa hotel up by the Dead Sea! The client team brought me down here for some R&R of which more later but first to biz.

The figures look fine. At this stage I wouldn't expect everything to balance - that would be too easy. Once we've got some volume and ongoing income sorted we can try and pull payback forward and there are bound to be economies of scale we simply can't know about at this point. Chuck E (It's all getting very matey now!) is fully committed to the concept. Which scares me because we've still got gaps to fill. He nearly gave me a heart attack last night when he mentioned that he had sold it in to the Vice President of Sales back in Chicago. If this doesn't come off we can expect a rap across the knuckles from New York. Oh the perils of success!

But it shows how much he is banking on the whole idea working. One of his stooges nearly stymied the idea by suggesting that every car park machine would need to have a gaming licence. Ridiculous! But we're well away from the legal fraternity so I called their bluff and said we were already checking this out. You will won't you? And make sure you get an international lawyer and a US attorney involved. We need to cover off all the bases on this one. If this flies, they want to roll it out everywhere and I mean everywhere. I had been hoping that if we did well across Europe then we might be given a pop at the US but they want to do it faster than that. They're terrified that Walmart will get a sniff of it and do it first. So they want to go as far and as fast as they can. That's why I'm reasonably relaxed about the financials. If we can make it work on a couple of thousand units then bigger shouldn't be a problem. Based on what they are projecting, we could be looking at doing 5 times that number. Which will make it a doddle to hit our target by year end.

It's kind of surreal. I got out here just a week ago and only expected to be here for a few days and I still can't see the end point. If I were more confident that the whole thing would go through then I'd get you and an exec out here to help me out but I can't risk the budget this quarter. It's made me realise how much of the time the parameters are clear between agency and client. Right now they're beginning to blur. I feel like I'm losing my detachment. Which is fine since it means the chemistry is good. But I worry I'm conceding too much. Five of them and one of me, but at least no lawyers!

Yesterday before we came down here I tried to walk out of the hotel to take a breather - and I was virtually hustled back into the lobby by the doorman on the grounds that it wasn't safe to go walking around the streets without security. They're worried about kidnappings and militants. I was offered a

car and a driver, but by this time I couldn't see the point of driving around the block a couple of times. I was beginning to go off my head cooped up in this glorified air-conditioned lock-up when Chuck suggested we all pile across to Eilat for the weekend. Treating me like family! Which was a definite win.

So this morning we got in a couple of limos and convoyed down past the Dead Sea and the site where Sodom once stood. It got me thinking about Sodom's most famous inhabitant Lot and what a rough ride he got from the Bible writers. Lot was Abraham's nephew, Abraham the great man who has been claimed as the father of Judaism, Islam and Christianity (quite an achievement when you think about it). And alongside Abraham, Lot looks like a bit of a stooge set up to make the great man greater. First Lot is portrayed as the selfish nephew who when they decide to split forces is given first choice and opts for the lush Jordan valley in the vicinity of the wicked cities Sodom and Gomorrah. Next we hear of Abraham's rescue of his hapless nephew after Lot is carried off in a raid. Then we find Abraham pleading for Sodom to be spared and the angels walking into the city to rescue Lot and his family when not even "10 righteous people" were to be found. And Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt because she doesn't run from the fire and brimstone fast enough. But I can't help feeling some sympathy for Lot. At least he was there - expressing some kind of solidarity with the people in whose territory he was living. And the whole dramatic dialogue between Abraham and God only makes sense because Lot got stuck in. It was easier for Abraham living in suburban detachment in the hills to keep some sense of perspective. Lot might have got a lousy press but he did more for Sodom than Abraham did, uncelebrated and confused as he was. Someone has to be the bloody infantry.

Which brings me to tonight's episode. We all had a fantastic meal, and headed for a nightclub. All very affable. And they really went out of their way to make me part of it. Including Chuck's PA who looked good enough to eat in a little cocktail dress, a pneumatic young woman who later on made me an offer I could barely refuse. Thinking of the times we take clients out when we make up the party with the best looking girls in the agency, it's hilarious. I just never thought anyone would do a number on me. She was very direct. Two healthy adults far from home who found each other attractive - no one would think any the worse of us if we did what came naturally. And no strings. Though I was riled that when I turned her down she started to imply that my rejection might make things difficult for her professionally. So a sour end to a very pleasant evening. I expect a little frostiness tomorrow for being so churlish with the "hospitality".

Don't mention any of this to Jan. She's got enough on her plate looking after the kids and it would only make her worry about it every time I go away. It's about 3 am so I'd better get some shuteye - they've arranged some kind of diving expedition for first thing in the morning. I'm just trying not to think about Room 237 right now and what was on offer. I really could do with jumping on a plane right now.....

Over and out Mike

Questions to consider

Bible Passages: Genesis 13, 18, 19

7. Should Mike tell his wife about what happened?
8. Who you think did more for Sodom, Abraham who pleaded unsuccessfully to save it or Lot because he lived there?
9. What kinds of boundaries do you set for yourself?
10. Should you take care to live well within your boundaries or should you live on the edge?

Briefing to group leader

The twin themes of this email are about identity and setting boundaries. After some time away from his colleagues Mike is isolated and outnumbered. Which makes him vulnerable - as he tries to land a major deal and negotiate while building a good working relationship with the client. In such circumstances anyone can become confused as to whose side they are on. This is as true for the person trying to remain faithful to their beliefs at work as for a lone member of a negotiating team. Some of Mike's reactions give us clues that identity derives as much from those we share our values with. We can't get by on our own - whether apart from colleagues or fellow believers without our identity being undermined.

The second theme is how people set boundaries and how far they should stay within them. A traditional approach to spirituality urges the believer to play safe. A rather unusual take is given to the Abraham vs Lot story suggesting that Lot did more for Sodom by living on the boundaries than Abraham who stayed in a place of safety away from the fleshpots of Sodom. Lot is often treated as the 'fall guy' versus Abraham the archetype of the righteous believer. It is worth remembering that in II Peter 2:7-8 Peter describes Lot as a righteous man. In times when denominational labels seem to be becoming less and less important one of the key things that characterises Christian faith is how far life should be lived on the boundaries or well within them. Some Christians seem to take a lot of risks - some Christians seem unwilling to take any.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 4

Moses: When the client doesn't want to listen....

Hi Rob - sorry about the phone call earlier - didn't mean to shout but wheels were coming off all over the place, I couldn't talk freely and there wasn't time to explain. Now it's late I have had a chance to set things out a little more clearly in my mind. Sorry for going off the deep end.

Basically I've been set up. I thought in the last couple of days that the whole thing was in the bag. We had been over the costs with a toothcomb. And it was just a question of putting in the finishing touches. What happened is that Chuck the client pulled a number on me. At 11 this morning he told me that we had to hack away more costs and that he wanted to reduce the agency fee by 30% to have a hope of the deal going ahead. I countered that given the complexity of the programme that level of cut would make it very difficult for us to put enough bodies onto it to service it properly. Whereupon he got nasty. He then let slip that he was less than satisfied with progress and had been in touch with Klingman at our New York office. There was no way I could call Klingman, because New York wouldn't be open for another couple of hours so all I could do was to wait - softening me up you might call it.

Then Klingman got on the phone - client's not happy so he's not happy - fix it if you please. All the usual pledges but no real support. Hence my calling you earlier about costs. We'll need more evidence. We need to cut enough out of the deal to demonstrate that a reduced headcount won't be able to deliver. Which Chuck knows perfectly well. I think he would settle for a 15% cut but it will really affect our ability to deliver and I'm dammed if I'm going to give him the satisfaction of backing off. Klingman comes thundering into London at the end of every financial year yelling about hitting targets. If we fall short on delivery he won't cut us any slack. And knowing Klingman he's already making contingency plans to have me replaced.

I get fed up with the game playing that goes on in this business. The stupid assumption that in any deal there has to be a winner and a loser with the loser presenting their throat. It doesn't move us forward and it wastes so much time. Chuck's perfectly aware that the programme will according to the projections deliver 3 times ROI so why get greedy? But there's no time to put it out to repitch so he's just cracking down on costs in a bid to impress HIS head office in Chicago.

I'm going to bluff him out. I have honourable precedent in this very city: Moses the iron man playing poker with Pharaoh - I can really take a leaf out of his book. It would be nice to have the plagues of Egypt to back me up but the Moses example will have to do. God put Moses into a strictly shut ended situation. Go tell Pharaoh let my people go. Go to the most powerful man in the Middle East and present an ultimatum. What a strategy! Direct confrontation, no compromise. There was no way Pharaoh was going to say

yes without looking weak. Tony Blair wouldn't have said yes, neither would George. And Pharaoh was more like Saddam. No wonder Moses did everything he could to get out of it. Pointed out that he had no mandate to speak for the people, pointed out that he was a lousy presenter. All to no avail. God just told him to get on with it and gave him a conjuring trick with snakes as a sales presenter. Moses knew he was a dead man.

He would survive long enough for Pharaoh to check out how much popular support he had and whether the natives were indeed restless. But as soon as Pharaoh realised he was working alone, he was bound to be garrotted for his impudence. So off he went, gave the ultimatum, did the snake trick which predictably failed to impress. And then the miracle happened. Or to be more precise, the plagues. And Pharaoh who had started out with all the cards lost them one by one. And the more intransigent he got, the more impossible his position. In the end Moses got the deal, he also got the people a golden handshake - all the Israelites got a payoff!

But there was one element in all of this that was unpredictable. On which the success of the whole strategy depended. And that was Moses' nerve. He had been raised in the court of Egypt, he knew how the system worked, and he knew the odds were totally against him. But he played the system and he never lost his nerve. Someone less courageous or experienced would have buckled under the strain. Remember he hadn't got a mandate from the people so was being undermined while he worked. Which I suppose is why he has been such an inspiration to reformers such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King who pressed forward with scant regard for the consequences. I feel a little self-conscious comparing myself with some one at his level. But sometimes only courage will do. And some times the scariest thing is not to do anything, to hold fire, to stay in position and wait. The whole Moses Pharaoh encounter was a Mexican standoff designed to show that God could deliver a bunch of slaves from a dictator without visible means of support. And I'm not trying to explain away the plagues which were the mechanism by which the Israelites were got out of Egypt. But I'm still inspired by the example of the man who held his ground and made it possible.

That's enough pomposity from me. I'm not budging from here so I'm all ears. Give me an update on the state of play in the office when you've a moment - I do feel well out of it now.

Over and out
Mike

Questions to consider

Bible Passage: Exodus 5

11. Should negotiation be win win or is that just a loser's perspective?
12. Why do you think Moses message was so uncompromising - guaranteed to get a negative response from Pharaoh?

13. Is Mike right to compare himself with Moses? Is there any connection between negotiating for the freedom of a people and cutting a business deal? Is God involved in both and how?
14. Do you act ever by not acting - by holding your position? What qualities help you do this?

Briefing to group leader

This email catches Mike in mid crisis. He has been caught off guard and the client is trying to force major concession by using a stand-off strategy. Firstly it is worth discussing the whole basis of negotiation - is the purpose to achieve advantage for your side to the other's detriment? How can both sides achieve a win-win and how do you do this if the other party isn't co-operating? The application of the Moses story suggests quite controversially that the ultimatum to Pharaoh was a negotiation strategy calculated to fail and provoke rejection by Pharaoh

Secondly Moses is used as a model of resistance. Many models of leadership involve motivation and action. Moses like many famous human rights leaders of the 20th century Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mandela achieves extraordinary results by holding his ground. This is not to undermine the miracles of the plagues of Egypt but to cast a spotlight on the raw courage required from a leader without a mandate from his people holding to a position when imprisonment or assassination was almost a foregone conclusion. Potentially at work the nature of the leadership which has to be adopted is one which achieves by holding to a position rather than moving it.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 5

Tyre: Success can make you blind....

Hi Rob I promised you an update on the day's events. I flew into New York this morning straight from Egypt and was whisked downtown to see Klingman in the Manhattan office. Since the client climbdown last week he couldn't have been more charming. I took the deal to the brink and got away with it. I know and he knows that if the deal had failed he'd have had my head on a platter. So it was an odd meeting. There's not a lot of chemistry when you know that you nearly got shafted by your own side.

He's having to be particularly accommodating because the scale of the promotion - now that we're going for a worldwide launch means we'll need to have a team handling it in Chicago that will report to me. Not the way he'd like it but he can't have it both ways. Last week he was prepared to throw me to the wolves. Now I've been left to my own devices with the client, I have more clout than he would wish. He'd like to put someone more senior onto it Stateside but can't be seen to do that because it'll look like he's undermining me. So I fly up there tomorrow to meet the top people clientside and to start to pull the US team together.

I was given a brief tour round the New York office after lunch - not quite sure why this was necessary but it gave Klingman a chance to sound off about how much of the civilised world is falls within the remit of the office. Every office space seemed to be devoted to yet another international account group with branch offices in Timbuktu. What really gets up my nose is the implication that each of these teams somehow controls what goes on. You won't be surprise to learn that in the Unilever and the Reebok groups the UK was just one more flag pin on the map. Someone who didn't know better would think they were making all the ads here in New York.

I have had the same vibe from doing business in Tokyo - the subtle insinuation that the city is in the driving seat and that whole world revolves around them. Which makes for great credentials but becomes dangerous when you start to believe your own hype. I've become very wary of the top down perspective, it is usually at a complete tangent with reality. You'll be raising your eyebrows at this one but it put me in mind me of a bit in the Bible where a prophet called Ezekiel takes the city of Tyre to task on it's arrogance and complacency. I checked out the passage when I got back to my hotel. Tyre was at the heart of the Phoenician empire a colony of seafaring traders who dominated the Mediterranean and in effect connected the ancient world together using the sea routes.

Ezekiel describes in huge detail where they went, what they traded and where it came from. But then he compares the city to a ship made from all the finest materials that sinks all of a sudden within sight of land to the consternation of all onlookers. You get the sense that no one was expecting

it because the trading network was so extensive and sophisticated that people assumed the good times would go on for ever. High throughput was taken to equal success when what was really happening was that the city became a rich prize for anybody with half an army.

I find the prophet's rather contrary viewpoint rather refreshing. The bottom up view of what's going on is usually more accurate. The Bible is full of bottom up stories where those who think they know what's going on get their comeuppance. Of course the challenge for each of us is what the bottom up view of us would be. It's easy for me to fly in and pick holes in Klingman's view of the world. Yes he's insular but we all live in our own little worlds. I find it intriguing that a holy book like the Bible doesn't go in for grand overviews but keeps getting short takes from the little people to keep itself honest.

Which brings me neatly to the point of the email. We need to get some beta testing going on the car park machines. I'm not comfortable moving development forward without some testing. Yes I know we have focus groups saying it's a great idea and yes the client has bought it. But if there are gremlins, I want to know about them before anybody else does. This is all about implementation. If the machines are hard to use or people don't get it or like the concept then we're stuffed. But we'll be stuffed worldwide rather than in one country alone! Can you arrange for a field trial to be done on the quiet in a shopping centre somewhere in the UK? I got Klingman's clearance to spend up to £50K. I'd like to get this rolling within the next month if possible.

That's all for now. After Chicago I think I'll be permitted back to London to cool my heels. Jan's coping very well - I never expected that I'd be away so long and she struggles with the separation. She made an odd comment yesterday about the project taking me over - bit of an over reaction I think when we're at such a critical stage but it's a reminder I need to get home.

Over and out

Mike

Questions to consider

If you want to check the passage you will find it in Ezekiel 27 though the whole of Ezek 26-28 is worth reading through. Also if you have the time Revelation 18. Ezekiel's take on Tyre was a big influence on the apostle John.

15. How do you treat colleagues you feel you can't trust?
16. Do you think the bottom up perspective is more valid than top down, less valid or just another perspective?
17. Is success dangerous? Does it blind us? If so how does it affect us?
18. How do we keep grounded? Whose opinions do we value and why?

19. Are you involved in global business? How do you take the little people into account?

Briefing to group leader

Mike has survived the standoff crisis of the last email and come out on top. He then has to spend time with his colleagues in the New York office who have in his opinion failed to support and even undermined him as he tried to close the deal with the client. The first theme is therefore how we treat those we feel undermine us behind our backs.

The second theme comes out of the fact that New York is the head office for the agency network for whom Mike works and he is rather startled to discover how head office views the world is rather different to the way the world is viewed from a regional office. The top down view tends to assume that all power comes from the top, that all credit accrues to the top and that the way the top sees the world is the way things are. Drawing on the prophecy written by Ezekiel against Tyre Mike reflects on the myopia which large organisations and countries have. Often the view from underneath is more revealing. And more useful when it comes to implementing grand strategies. It is sobering to consider that Ezekiel's prophecy against the Phoenicians the commercial superpower of the day, came from a refugee camp. The City of London as seen from Songat!

Emails from Hotel Babylon 6

Babel: Divided by a common language....

Hi there Rob - wish you were here. Chicago's freezing! Not sure where exactly to start on a progress update. It has been an odd couple of days. I flew in on Tuesday and went straight to the client's offices. I always have a great feeling of relief when you finally get access to the top people. So much time gets wasted when the organisation is trying to second guess what the great man wants. It doesn't make it much easier to deal with them - CEOs are generally direct and irascible - that's why they got the job - but the BS quotient is a lot lower. Most of the meeting was spent going over the concept - clarifying particular details for him. The CEO (Lester) has a very clear grasp of the mechanic and what it's likely to do for the business - in fact he saw a number of points I'd not seen but which I'm sure I'll make use of in future! His main concern was how fast we could get it out in a useable form. He's obviously in a hurry and I was told on the way in that as a group they're under a lot of financial pressure.

Anyway in the afternoon we went to the Chicago agency office where I met Chuck who will be running the Chicago team and that's where things started to unravel. At first I thought it was down to Klingman's influence from New York - I'm still walking around on hot bricks after my time in New York and the situation I so narrowly escaped back in Cairo. But as I sat down with the Chicago team it became evident that they really didn't have much grasp of the scale of the implementation though they obviously feel hugely under pressure to deliver - living under the nose of an irascible CEO I'm sure hasn't helped matters. So for example they wanted to throw Turkey into the Middle East group - as if Ankara was half an hour's plane trip from Dubai. So we had a brief tiff about the logistics of grouping Turkey. They kept coming back to the fact that it was a Muslim country and that they would understand Arabic. My point was that Turkey these days is a lot more aligned with Europe and that there will be legal issues with some of the more hard line Islamic countries about a promotional mechanic which is basically about gaming - something the mullahs can get quite hot under the collar about.

We went onto a debate about where to fit in Taiwan and the connection with Hong Kong. I shan't bore you with the details. It became very evident that Chuck's view of Asia derived in large part from being a serviceman there 20 years ago - and the more heated he got the more he accused me of being a Brit out of touch with International business. Well as someone who hasn't seen the green green grass of Heathrow in over a month I took exception. When I calmed down later it occurred to me that even if it were true that I did look on the world as a bunch of British colonies that the implementation will be carried out not by me in an ostrich plume helmet or Chuck from the deck of the USS whatever but a local Chinese manager but I didn't think of it at the time.

You won't be surprised that when I got back to my hotel room I grabbed a bible and went hunting for some inspiration. I found it in the story of the tower of Babel - one of the first grand projects found in the Bible. The people of Babel set out to build a ziggurat (a high rise by any other name). Only this one would be bigger and higher than anyone one else's. Using bricks rather than stone meant that they could work a lot faster. They got the idea that building something this high would give them clout. Partly because it would force them to work together - and a city based power would find it easy to defeat village based tribes. And as the story goes it would give them a towering reputation ;-). Anyway God decided to put a stop to it multiplying the number of languages spoken. I wonder how it happened? Was it because the project was so big that they had to use slaves from further and further afield so the number of languages they had to cope with shot up? Anyway they could no longer live and work together. The project was over and they scattered everywhere. It makes you wonder what the natural limits of globalisation are. The world isn't going to end up speaking English however much we want to believe it. We're more likely to have to start learning Chinese. And before then the Americans are all going to have to speak Spanish!

It isn't only the Brits and the Yanks who are divided by a common language. One of the biggest pitfalls working across cultures is understanding what ambitions people have. You can use the same words but mean something very different with them. And of course the big problem is not the misunderstanding itself. It's the misattribution of motives. I know Chuck's got me labelled as a snooty Limey who looks down on him and doesn't respect his experience, and I've got him tabbed as a gung ho ex GI. So we're likely to mistrust anything the other says. And that to me is the challenge of the Babel Project. Ultimately self interest is catastrophic to any big project - you would all benefit from working together but you can't trust each other enough to see it through it there's no one to grab everyone by the scruff off the neck and make you co-operate. We'll get through it but only by getting to know each other better and giving each other the benefit of the doubt.

Nearly done here. And back with you by the end of the week I hope. The CEO mentioned something about a small issue we have to resolve first. I hope it's not another time bomb - standoff waiting in the wings!

Over and out Mike

Questions to consider

If you want to check the passage you will find it in Genesis 11:1-9

20. What examples can you recall of non communication and non co-operation at work? To what would you attribute these?
21. Are there limits to co-operation? Are there ways we can overcome them?
22. How do you keep ambition in check? When does ambition become damaging and destructive?

23. What is the secret of increasing the longevity of a company? What are the benefits of increasing longevity? What are the downsides?

Briefing to group leader

Mike has moved on from New York to the Chicago office to conclude the deal with the CEO clientside in Chicago. This inevitably makes for political tension between him and the agency team in Chicago who have a daily working relationship with the client and don't appreciate an interloper going over their heads. This is used to enlarge on theme of the New York Tyre email and points of view but this time where we see the world differently from colleagues to the point where we find it difficult to work with them. Using the Tower of Babel story the email asks a deep question about the basis for co-operation at work. How are trust and co-operation possible in a fallen world when we have different agendas and see the world differently from colleagues with whom we may even be competing. This is critical in a global economy where organisations have to establish a working ethos across geographical, language and cultural barriers. The Babel factor means that we have to be quite pessimistic about the longevity of most human organisational structures. Most companies have a lifespan much less than most humans.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 7

Samaria: Religion that pays

Hi Rob. Well once again things have taken an interesting turn - I'll be positive and say that is part of the price of success - but well - it's the chairman's wife syndrome but a variation I've not come across before. The CEO Lester took me to one side and explained the "issue" we need to resolve. The company went public years ago but still retains a strong family interest. The family is from the deep South - Southern Baptists all and Lester's mother who is a major stock holder, has heard about the gaming promotional concept and doesn't like the sound of it. The plan is to fly me down from Chicago to Atlanta to discuss the matter with said matriarch and her pastor!!

In the mean time Lester took me to a dinner with some kind of Christian Business Association - perhaps he's softening me up! The thing took place in a restaurant downtown. The meal was fine - it just got interesting as soon as the coffee was served and the speeches started! Then it was testimony time with speaker after speaker explaining how God had blessed their businesses. It very quickly became apparent that there were a few common threads - giving away 10% of your income, avoiding profanity, keeping straight business dealings, not trading on the Sabbath, not to mention avoiding the demons of tobacco and alcohol.

You're probably thinking that given my habit of picking up a bible and thumbing through it to try and make sense of the situations I find myself in, that I would be in clover. Frankly it gave me the creeps. I expect a lot of my reactions came down to cultural differences, how you say it as much as what you say. There was a whole lot of additional stuff that was apparently part of the deal - teaching 6 days of creation in schools for example. So was the right to self defence, yup the National Rifle Association rearing it's ugly head again! I really couldn't see what a lot of this stuff had to do with faith and it rather looked as if a whole way of life was being justified with Him upstairs being called upon to legitimise the whole kit and caboodle.

But differences between UK and US lifestyles aside what really bugged me is how formulaic it was. Most of the speakers started the same way - hum drum lives or at worst a crisis - marriage on the rocks, business in the red. Then by applying simple God fearing principles they turn into millionaires. Trouble and suffering becomes devil inspired opposition to be overcome by the exercise of faith. But it wasn't faith, it was magic. The discovery of a spell which if recited delivers a predictable result.

You won't be surprised to find that once safely back in my hotel room the Bible was once again out and in use! This time I found the story of the prophet Elijah a cantankerous and isolated character, who was used to bring the nation of Israel back to faith. He lived in a time when Ahab the king had built up the city of Samaria a new capital established by his father, married

Jezebel daughter of a nearby king and allowed her to set up her pet deities in Samaria. In Jezebel's case this was a husband and wife team Baal and Ashtaroth who were fertility gods. The deal was very simple Worship Baal and Ashtaroth, make the right sacrifices and the harvest will come. On time - and the economy will flourish

The line of attack for Elijah was very clear. He turned up at the palace with a simple message from God. No rain until further notice. A drought followed which lasted for 3 years. It was a direct confrontation with the Baal, the god who was supposed to guarantee the rain. Jezebel took it personally and set about eliminating the competition. Anyone trying to remain faithful to God was in big trouble. Elijah stayed under cover for all of that time. Then he reappeared to announce a contest to settle the matter once and for all. On the top of Mount Carmel he prepared an altar with a sacrifice on it and invited the priests of Baal to do the same. However the sacrifice was not lit. The winner would be the God who lit the sacrifice with no human assistance. The priests of Baal went first and spent most of the day calling on Baal. The story records that they cut themselves with knives in an attempt to get a response. All to no avail. Then in the late afternoon Elijah sets up shop. He makes an altar, puts the sacrifice on it. Then he pours water all over the sacrifice. Three times. A profligate use of water after 3 years of drought. And no possibility of spontaneous combustion! And God answers with a bolt of lightning that consumed the sacrifice, the altar and all of the water around it. The triumphant prophet wipes out the opposition (literally) and tells the king to get in his chariot and to try and reach his palace in Samaria before the rain returns and bogs his wheels down. And true to his word the rain returns.

A long story but a good one (though it doesn't end there!). What really characterises Elijah's faith is that it wasn't mechanical. Being faithful didn't guarantee you rain in fact it could well get you persecuted. The whole deal with Baal was supposed to deliver a particular type of result and it was clear that the Baal cult was run on rails - rails which didn't actually work.

It seems to me a fundamental error to turn faith into a formula - to say that God can be treated like a slot machine who produces the goods if you press the right buttons. I believe that faith in God makes a difference but one based on a relationship not a contract. I tried tactfully to discuss this with Lester but I think we inhabit different planets. I await the meeting with his mother with foreboding.

Must get some sleep. What a life!

Over and out

Mike

Questions to consider

If you want to check the passage you will find it I Kings 16:29-17:7; whole of 1 Kings 18. If you want to do some homework check out Hosea 2 where there is a deliberate and dangerous parallel drawn between the Baal the husband and God the husband. The Israelites would have used the same name for Baal and God. Was God's relationship with Israel unconditional - a husband who would take his wife back or would God kick Israel out? Hosea 2:16 is a key verse.

24. Does faith in God deliver material blessings or not?
25. What is wrong with formulaic faith? Surely a deal is a deal and if you believe in God you're entitled to something in return.
26. If you integrate your faith with your work what difference will it make to your lifestyle and your standard of living?

Briefing to group leader

The point of the email is to raise questions about what practical difference faith in work makes. Can you expect pay rises and promotion? Does God endorse and bless a particular lifestyle? If there is no correlation then what evidence is there that God makes a difference? But if there is a linear correlation between obeying God and being blessed then this study suggests that it's not really faith it's magic. And God will not be held to this.

The Kings passage is used because of the connection between Samaria (wicked city of the Bible) and the cult of Baal. The Elijah stories draw a contrast between the mechanical nature of fertility religion and the unpredictability but faithfulness of God.

The Hosea passage is a fascinating one that probably can't be tackled in the same session because it would make it too long. However it very provocatively explores the question Does God force us to be obedient through threats of punishment? It strongly suggests that God is torn both ways and does not and will not behave like the Baal - though sometimes He feels like doing so! Even punishment and estrangement is linked to ultimate reconciliation. There's some very deep theology going on here! The point is that the name Baal meant husband and master. And this is the relationship God wants with Israel but based on love not fear.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 8

Jerusalem: priest turned prostitute ...

Hi Rob and thanks for your email which cheered me up no end. Very funny! You obviously thought I'd got my comeuppance - the Bible basher outnumbered and outbashed. But events have taken a terminally weird course now. Basically I think the programme is dead in the water. And all down to a Southern Baptist minister!

I told you last time that Lester had hinted at an "issue" that needed resolving. While the company is publicly owned, the family and specifically Lester's mother retains a strong stock holding and she doesn't like the sound of the promotion at all. So Lester arranged to fly down with me from Chicago to Atlanta to meet with his mother and (wait for it) her pastor!

On the flight down I became aware that I was being (no other word to put it) coached. Mummy dearest is strongly opposed to liquor, tobacco and as it turns out gambling and was horrified to discover that the company was set to throw its weight behind a global gaming promotion as she sees it. My view is that the opportunity to win discounts by taking a token out of a mall car park machine hardly constitutes gambling - parking is free anyway so we're hardly dragging people into an addiction that will impoverish them. Lester felt this was a dangerous line to take and that it would be better to concentrate on limiting the use of the promotion to markets outside of the US. I confess I was a bit slow on the uptake and wondered why that would be convincing - surely if gambling was out of line in the US then it should be out of line anywhere else. Lester then looked distinctly uncomfortable and muttered that in the opinion of his mother's minister there could be exceptions because this was God's judgment on the disobedient. It turns out that on one occasion a tricky situation with a restaurant chain serving alcohol was overturned because the chain was situated in a particular Muslim country and this demonstrated the folly of people who had turned their backs on the one true God.

If you're finding all this hard to swallow how do you think I feel? Anyway the client is the client so off we went to downtown Atlanta to meet with Mummy and the Reverend. And so we played the whole thing out. Mummy stormed and said how shocked she was, the Reverend shook his head. Lester set out with his "the pagans have got it coming to them" gambit. And I tried to keep my head down. Which I wasn't allowed to do for very long - of course as the miscreant who had thought all of this up in the first place, I was asked my reaction. And I had to say honestly that as a person of faith it really hadn't bothered me and I had had no idea of the potential offence it had caused, was very sorry and so on. Perhaps if I had continued to eat humble pie I might have got away with it as an ignorant foreigner. Unfortunately I opened my stupid mouth and before I could stop myself said that I knew the Bible pretty well but had never ever found any prohibition on gambling and I'd be interested to know where the key passages were.

Which was the wrong thing to say. The Reverend reacted as if a snake had bit him. Apparently the Bible is FULL of prohibitions on gambling. But as he thundered on it became obvious that his proof texts were about liking money too much and not trusting God but nothing specifically about gambling. And the more he ran out of steam the angrier he got. I suggested that perhaps the Bible was interpreted differently in the UK from the US and by that stage the cat was really out of the bag. I was accused of being no fit person to work with the company. As far as Lester's gambit was concerned the Rev said gambling was a judgement on unbelief and as such the promotion could continue as long as it was in "pagan nations" but not in Christian ones. So we got part of what we wanted but I became the fall guy. After a rather frosty end to the meeting I was whisked back to the airport and back to Chicago. On my own that is. Lester stayed behind to calm Mummy down.

The upshot is that the whole project has been put on ice - while the company thinks about it. Lester wasn't at all happy with my performance and wants me off the business. The promotion could be worked just outside of the US but it loses so much of the economies of scale by not running here that there isn't a lot of point in continuing. So I'm due to check out of the hotel in an hour and fly back to New York for a tete a tete with Klingman - I'm really looking forward to that! And perhaps after that they'll allow me home!

It's hard to be rational about anything that has happened over the last couple of days. I really am in favour of people putting their beliefs into practice as much at work as anywhere else. But this display of bigotry left me speechless. There was obviously no room for alternative opinions. At the same time the minister and the stockholder were adept at creating a 2 tier system that justified anything as long as it wasn't being carried out on their own turf. I've since found out that the company has even owned casinos but kept quiet about them and made sure that they were tucked away in forgotten corners of the world. And went on collecting the money.

It reminded me of Jesus' take on Jerusalem, the city he wept over as he approached it. At one at the same time a holy city and a centre of religious hypocrisy and bigotry. Throughout its history it has been fought over by people who claimed that only their way was right and most of the time they were able to justify anything as long as it served their cause. Jerusalem has always given religion a bad name and right now I've had a bellyful of it.

Over and out

Mike

Questions to consider

There are a number of passages about the bigotry of Jerusalem. Start with Jesus words in Matthew 23:37-39 which are the culmination of his tirade

against the religious leaders through the whole of the chapter. If you have time check out Isaiah 1:21-26

27. Do religion and business go together or should they be kept apart?
28. Does religious practice have to be consistent or should we tolerate the inconsistencies out of respect for people's culture?
29. How far should religious people go in forcing others to comply with their beliefs?
30. How do you treat people at work from different religious backgrounds? The same or any different? Why is this?

Briefing to group leader

This is one of the toughest emails to discuss from a UK perspective because there is so little application of religion to business practice. However the example although it is farfetched raises the issue of how religious values ought to be applied. After all it's what this series is about! And this example looks at the effects of religious observance from the perspective of someone who feels victimised by it.

The first issue is how we approach the application of religious values to work issues. How far should we push it? What goes wrong? One of the biggest criticisms of religious practice is that it is inconsistent and hypocritical. And should we treat religious observance as a conceptual system that ought to be consistent or as a cultural phenomenon to be tolerated. Ultimately when we put what we believe into practice it will affect other people who don't share our beliefs. And their response may be negative.

The second issue is about the abuse of power. Is a religious person obligated to use their influence to apply their beliefs even when this is controversial? Or should their religion be kept a private matter?

Emails from Hotel Babylon 9

Ninevah: when the wrong people say sorry ...

Hi Rob. One last email before bed. I just had dinner with Klingman in some high-ticket eatery on the West side so I've come back with my mind buzzing - I won't be able to sleep for an hour or so anyway so I may as well give you an update.

Well I can confirm that the promotion is on hold. Klingman made a superficial attempt to carpet me for how I handled the Atlanta situation - after all Lester the client is still fuming. But politically it puts me back in my box and safely out of the way of the Chicago office who must be breathing a sigh of relief at my departure. Lester still wants to do the promotion when the fuss has died down a little and will want to run it out of Chicago (so Chuck will be over the moon). And Klingman has had the bright idea that since they haven't yet committed we are perfectly in our rights to tout it so some of the networks biggest clients, so that either Lester gets going or we sell the idea to somebody else. So all in all he doesn't regard it as a bad outcome. We have licenced the technology behind the car park instant win mechanic. It's just a question of who buys it and how widely they will use it. We stand to make a lot of money whatever happens. Therefore although this morning's meeting was reasonably heavy he briefed me to go and hussle some of our biggest clients worldwide. And then to show no hard feelings he invited me out to dinner this evening.

He's a strange character Klingman, mind like a calculator, mouth like a steel trap. A tough corporate politician I wouldn't trust as far as I could throw him. I think he actually quite likes me because I don't kow-tow to him the way most of his subordinates do. Perhaps he regards me as a bit of a challenge. Anyway I seem to have emerged from this whole debacle with some credit which is better than I was expecting on the plane back from Atlanta. We talked a bit over the meal about the confrontation in Atlanta and how bizarre I had found what I saw as a classic case of religious bigotry. He was non committal but obviously intrigued because he asked me if I was religious and when I said yes he asked me how I felt about having put so much into the project only to have it wrecked in such an unexpected way. I said that while I was gutted I wasn't sure the project was dead - only that it might well have to go on without me. I thought I had given it my best shot - ultimately my ego isn't taken up with pulling deals off - there's more to life.

And then it was like watching the dam waters burst. Klingman started to answer but broke down. 5 minutes later when he had gotten control of himself he said he'd been having a few personal problems. Apparently his wife has filed for divorce - it's looking pretty messy, there's a mistress somewhere in the background. And being the chief executive of a public company that is trying to deliver an 20% increase in billings in a depressed market is pretty tough (I wouldn't like to do it). And all in all he isn't doing

so well. He delivered this to me straight across the table. Klingman of all people!

Then he asked me to pray for him. Now I'm not easily thrown but this one had me gob-smacked. It's not that I don't pray in public - I do - well in church at any rate when I get a chance to get there. But this was my boss and let's face it - I don't like him very much. I asked him what he wanted me to pray for him and again my jaw hit the floor. Not about his marriage, or the stock price - he wanted to turn his life over to God. So that's what I did. Right there in downtown Manhattan. I don't know if I helped him much - it came so out of the blue I wasn't at all sure where he was coming from. And when we left I said I would go on praying for him. And he seemed to take a lot of comfort from that.

So here I am leafing through my Bible (again) this time to Jonah, the grouchiest, grumpiest prophet of them all. God tells him to tell the people of Nineveh to repent and Jonah heads in the opposite direction - hence the story of being swallowed by the whale as a bit of a dramatic U turn. Everyone in the book behaves better than Jonah - there are praying sailors, repenting Ninevites, a king who puts on ashes and sackcloth. What really gets Jonah's goat is that he hates the Ninevites, doesn't think they should be given a chance to change their ways and really loses it when they do so and God lets them off. As he sees it the whole exercise has been a waste of his time because he always knew God would be merciful - so why bother?

I feel rather like Jonah right now. I believe that God is interested in my work and the people I work with. I think He helps me do better work and perhaps I can be an influence for good if I hang in there. I just wish that I had some say in the people God chooses to deal with. I've always thought Klingman was a scumbag and recent events haven't proved me wrong. And I'm mortified that when it came to it that I was the person he turned to. There are always people you hope would come to share your faith and I suppose you would be on that list Rob. But Saul Klingman isn't one of them!

Well my newly converted boss wants me on the road for a little while longer - I managed to negotiate to get Jan flown out here for the weekend - her sister can look after the kids. 4 weeks on this project away from her has just been too long. And I'm off to the West Coast on Monday to make the first of the pitches to try and land someone else for the car park promotion. Isn't life strange?

Over and out

Mike

Questions to consider

Jonah should be short enough to read through quickly. 4 short chapters. The book is intended to be satirical; Jonah is the bigot here! Is his prayer in

the whole genuine or is his high flown rhetoric a bit of a send up? How would you pray in a whale?!

31. On what basis do you perceive people to be close or distant from God?
32. Think back on times when you have been close to God or far away. How aware have other people been of what was going on inside you?
33. What should you do about people you dislike at work?

Briefing to group leader

This is quite a simple email after the complexities of religious bigotry discussed in the last one. This is about how narrow we can often be in our perception of the kinds of people God deals with. And the more we dislike someone the harder it is to believe that God has any time for them. The discussion needs to be about how we get our attitudes and our perceptions straight.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 10

Corporate Accountability – everything in it's proper place

Hi there Rob. Well here I am in sun soaked California. I got here on Thursday and Jan flew in direct at the weekend. Things a little frosty - we've been apart a long time but I think she's beginning to thaw. We headed down the coast towards San Antonio on Saturday and spent the day on the beach then drove up towards Seattle along the coast on Sunday and visited the Redwood forests inland. The meeting with Ralph Lundgren was first thing yesterday morning. He's everything you would expect a Californian to be - tall blond, good looking and disgustingly healthy. He runs the Adonis chain of health clubs across the US though mostly in the South and West. They are thinking moving into Europe though I suspect it will be through acquisition. He was smart enough to follow the development of the giant shopping malls and to piggy back his gyms on the back of them. Which seems to have served him well. He sees the car park promotion idea as a great support for strengthening his arm with the management of the malls. Owning a gym hasn't the same clout as running a multi-screen movie theatre for example but if the machines installed in the car park are his then everyone else will have to come to him to get their promotional offers included.

Which is why he wants an exclusive. Nothing of course on the scale of Lester in Chicago but good money nonetheless. Of course we don't want to lose control of this. Saul briefed me to ensure we got a percentage and retained the rights. So Ralph has turned on a charm offensive. Jan and I were invited to his hacienda for dinner last night and he did his best to sweep her off her feet - it was like watching a rabbit in the headlights! Today I had a breakfast meeting with him and the steel is starting to show. He's a man in a hurry and he's doing his utmost to make my stalling make me look difficult and un-neighbourly. He won't have anything to do with the percentage idea - needs full control - can't have too many players at the table. It sounds dreadful but frankly after the last few weeks this good cop bad cop stuff is light relief, and the good cop stuff feels like feather bedding. Jan was off this morning with him riding around the estate. I know I've got something he wants and frankly a bit of stalling won't do any harm. This place is incredible. There seem to be a load of beautiful people - some staff but some corporate clients staying on the ranch for a few days. I look at my flabby arms and pale skin tone and want to run for cover. But its not just that. They all seem to move like animals in an Attenborough documentary - pure slowmo!

So I must be in clover right? Got the run of a 15,000 acre ranch. Well I'm not so sure. Last night Ralph was quite candid on what makes his business successful - the gyms do well but what really makes the margin is the cosmetic surgery business running alongside. The fitness market is a perfect one - once you start there's never a good reason for stopping - why give up all you've achieved? But in the case of this organisation there's a short cut.

You can always go under the knife. So it turns out that at least half the beautiful people loping around the ranch here didn't achieve their physique on the exercise machines but in the surgery - and the same front desk peddles both. Now you're going to call me a whinging Brit and chide me for narrowmindedness and intolerance towards Californians but surely keeping bodies fit and chopping bits off them is a conflict of interest? "What would you like madam? 2 sets of abdominal stretches 4 days a week for a month or liposuction next Wednesday? And would you like us to arrange the finance?"

Why does it bother me? Because what we're offering lets Ralphie here get his claws into a lot more people and I don't agree with what he's doing. Yup I'm reaching for my Bible again and this time it's Colossians. The apostle Paul writing to a little church in a Turkish town plagued by rules and superstition. In the face of which he talks about all things being created by Christ and for him and all things having their place in him. Over every society is a group of powerful ideas - and health and fitness is one of those. But left to their own devices these ideas dehumanise us. I want to stay fit and look youthful but not at any price. What Paul seems to be saying is that Jesus Christ stands in a unique place as a divine figure big enough to take on the big ideas in our world - and a human who can keep our values human. Without the restraining influence of a Christ figure we are liable to fall prey to powerful ideas which may have been good in their origin but have a habit of running away with themselves. And whole societies have gone off the rails this way.

We tend to think that in the West we are immune. But that is because we have established a free market for ideas. It's not that we have any more control but that there are so many ideas jostling for attention that no one is able to take over. It doesn't stop us being colonised by values we only have agree to. And let's face it the advertiser with the deepest pockets can virtually insinuate anything at will - no one can stop them. It's true none of us will admit that we personally are influenced by advertising but the figures show we must be.

I don't want to be difficult but I really don't want the Adonis chain going from strength to strength on the back of the car park promotion. Will I have the guts to tell Ralph that? Probably not. But I wondered whether I needed to be playing quite so hard to get - and this sense of unease has grown throughout the day. It'll be interesting to see how good Ralph is at closure.

Good night from me! Jan is out like a light = the sleep of the just - I need to join her!

Mike

Questions to consider

Read through the verses of Colossians 1:15-20.

34. Do the controlling ideas in our culture dehumanise us? What examples can you think of? What do you do about values which you disagree with and find unhelpful?
35. How does Christ humanise values? Isn't it the case that there are churches and denominations whose values have a negative effect? What about them?
36. How effective are you at confronting the real issues at work and being frank with your misgivings?

Briefing to group leader

This study marks something of a step change from the studies into Old Testament characters. For the first time we are into a classic piece of Pauline teaching - and the point of the email is to look at the Lordship of Christ in much broader terms than His rule over the church and the life of the individual Christian. This is very exploratory stuff but if Jesus is Lord of the universe then he is Lord over every idea and ideology - sobering stuff for people working in companies that routinely hire agencies to associate their organisation with a particular set of ideas. What are the appropriate boundaries for this kind of activity and how does the dark side of this constant promoting of corporate values - usually to sell stuff affect people in a way that is unhelpful. The intent is not to get distracted by a tirade on advertising but to take a long look at how ideas shape our lives and whether Jesus influence is challenging and transforming this.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 11: Romans

The Powers that be – God's servants

Hi there Rob - well it's very late and I just wanted to respond to your email before I turn in. It has been a fantastic day - Ralph had some business to do with a certain rather large software company north of Seattle today so invited Jan and I along for the trip. We're still "negotiating" but he's pausing to get his people to look at the figures again and I've said I'll do the same though I shan't pass any work onto you - we've been through this enough times already - we know the parameters - it's a relatively straightforward negotiation - there's a lot of potential with these guys but the truth is that with our package they can make a lot more progress opening up sports centres in the rest of the US and getting into Europe - its not the scale of the Chicago people where the volume of business worldwide was enough to make your eyes water! So this morning bright and early we walked out to the airstrip at the back of the ranch house and there was a little Gulfstream jet to take us up to Seattle. Ralph insisted on piloting the plan himself though we had a flight crew of 3 in attendance. And it was brilliant - our route took us up past San Francisco - and we were high enough to be able to see the sea all the way up. I've always been struck how successful people view the world through the frame of where they live and work and Ralph was no different. He took particular care to point out to us the corporate headquarters on the way up. The plane dipped down over Santa Clara at one end of Silicon Valley - it's amazing how many major companies are located there. Even after the dot com boom much of the USA's wealth comes from a tiny area. Ralph pointed out Intel, Oracle, Cisco, Hewlett Packard and of course the maverick Apple as we flew over. And onto Redmond, Seattle. I can't comment on the meeting which I sat in on. I'm NDA'd up to the eyes - suffice to say that portable computing is amazing and ,moving into potentially fascinating territory - Ralph was obviously hoping that seeing him in action as a "player" with one of the biggest movers on the planet would encourage me to be more co-operative and I have to admit I am impressed - his connections are good - and if he lands half the business he's doing he'll make more than the small fortune he already has.

Over lunch with a couple of VPs the conversation turned to philanthropy - it was a full and frank discussion of the benefits of corporate do-gooding - tax deductible and getting you acres of media coverage often in sectors where it is difficult to advertise and where there is suspicion of advertising. What I took out of it was the vast influence companies now have and how so much of the public sphere is being privatised - something Naomi Klein goes into at great length in No Logo. These companies are involved not only in the arts, but in sport, and education. They own the news channels that report news including news about them. It intrigues me because conventionally we like to have our nations run by elected governments, our news channels by independent broadcasting companies and our charities run for the benefit of

the community. But the distinction between these is becoming more and more muddled.

In your last email you obviously have reservations about the possibility of controlling global corporations and the huge budgets they can put behind a very single minded brand idea. One of the most surprising political commentaries I have ever read is in the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 13 where he describes the Roman Empire as a servant of God - extraordinary because the Roman Empire apart from building roads, collecting taxes and imposing peace spent a lot of it's energies persecuting Christians because their allegiance to Christ brought them into conflict with their loyalty to Caesar. But nonetheless Paul tells the Roman church to obey the government, which has been placed in power by God, and that obedience to the State counts as obedience to God. All of which makes me ponder in a world where nation states seem to have less and less relevance other than to protect their borders from immigrants and to fight wars with each other, whether the new powers that be are the corporations.

As Jan was saying to me only yesterday - what the kids watch on TV has a lot more effect than the government's attempts to manipulate education through curriculum, tests and league tables. Oil and car companies now talk about the environment, IT companies "own" education, sports brands own wellbeing and personal development, financial services brands now are colonising retirement and healthcare (even if they do it so badly we don't want to believe them). But the institutions we grew up with are fading away in these areas - unwilling to invest or to take moral leadership if it is unpopular with the voters. Perhaps Nike, Shell, Apple and Toyota are among the new world powers not only because people buy their products but because people consume the values they promote.

Anyway enough of the digression - later in the day we went downtown into Seattle to join Jan and we dined at the waterfront overlooking Puget sound before getting the jet back to the ranch - we got back an hour ago. Ralph has been a great host and part of me regrets the need to close this deal and get back to London.

Thanks for the tip-off re the suppliers - I haven't any reason to doubt Ralph at present he's playing it straight but by all means find out who is making enquiries about trying to licence the idea.

Mike

Questions to consider

Read through the verses of Romans 13: 1-6

37. What is the relationship between God and the powers that be?
38. Do you accept Mike's extrapolation that now corporations are taking over this role from governments? Why?
39. Who is accountable for the values being espoused by major corporations - their leaders, the media who promote them governments for legislating what can and cannot be done or consumers who buy what they produce?
40. Can a company be a servant of God? How does a good servant behave?
41. Do you pray for your country? Do you pray for your company? What's the difference? What should you pray?

Briefing to group leader

This study presses on into Paul's teaching - and makes a rather startling leap from governments to corporations. The purpose of this is twofold: we have to acknowledge the power of the commercial world and its relationship to God is a critical one - and one people won't necessarily have talked about. The top 100 largest economies of the world now have a minority of governments - most are now multi-national companies. Now politics aside, whether markets should be free and unfettered may be debatable - that it should somehow be a God free zone is surely not if we believe that God is involved in the government of a nation. But there is a second more subtle point that how the companies we work for behave and the values they promote are God's business and our business too - this isn't just about making a profit - it's about the impact of what the company does and what the company believes on the community in which it trades. This is a different focus from the Colossian study, which is about how brand ideas in particular are restrained and humanised. The Romans passage asks us to consider everything a company does and to ask not only about natural restraints but whether it might actually might be serving God's purposes.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 12: Babylon 2

The fiery furnace – Saying no at any costs

Rob this is a note by way of explanation. I'm in the office suite at LAX airport - officially the deal with Ralph is on hold - but basically I've refused to close the deal with him and walked. I've just had a blazing row with Saul Klingman in New York by video conference. Officially he's backing me but it seems clear to me that he'll put a new negotiator in to try and pull something out of the fire. I'm on 2 strikes now and have one last chance to land a deal or I'm out - so I'm off to Karachi in Pakistan for one last shot. It's against the clock because by my reckoning it'll only be 48 hours before my replacement ties things up with Ralph's gym network.

It all started this morning with what I thought would be the final session to close the deal. As you know I've been increasingly uncomfortable about the way they "blend" cosmetic surgery with health clubs. Perhaps none of my business - I'm just selling a promotional idea but I don't believe we should do business with just anyone. Maybe that means I wasn't in the best frame of mind. And Ralph chose to play hardball. He did a full frontal assault on the margin which I deflected. He wanted a 20% cut- take it or leave it. So I left it. At which point he claimed he had secured access to suppliers and the licencing and didn't need me - so well done for spotting the approach and seeing it off at their end - I knew he was bluffing. At which point he lost his cool and said if I didn't want to do business with him then he'd call Klingman and get someone in from the network who would. So I walked. Packed up the stuff, ordered a car for the airport and Jan and I left within the hour.

The video conference with Klingman was colourful - he may have be a born again Christian like me now but it didn't show! I was ordered to get back to Bakersfield - I refused. And said I'd offer my resignation if he didn't back me up. Which he eventually did though with the strings I've mentioned above. So how am I feeling? - well a bit numb though relieved that I didn't go through with the deal - they give me the creeps and I'd like just one more chance to give the promotion to some one who's running a business I could actually endorse. The adrenalin is still flowing - and the fight is on. I'm actually quite relieved that the issues are now in the open.

But it's a showdown to the finish - I won't compromise - I've had enough of taking on lousy clients to make quarterly targets and despite the pressure in New York this isn't as critical a deal as they're making out - though I guess it's important enough for me not to throw in the towel. In the car on the way down I had my Bible open again - had to have something to bash someone with! - in the book of Daniel where the 3 friends defy the king. He orders them to bow down to a gold statue of himself. When they refuse he threatens to throw them into a furnace - their challenge is that they believe they can be saved from the flames but even if not they won't change their

mind. In the story they are miraculously saved by a fourth figure who walks in the middle of the furnace with them. When they come out there's no indication that their clothes had even been singed. Now perhaps you might choose to interpret this an extreme story about religious persecution. I don't think so. The image to me represents any situation where you are being forced to act in ways that are untrue to yourself. I've objected to research underage drinkers on behalf of drinks companies however plausible their reasons for researching them were. And I would draw a line at working for companies that sell munitions to the Third World - my objection isn't religious as such. But if my work counts for anything then I want it to count for something that I could endorse. And despite the cynics I still think it's possible to hold such principles and earn a living.

I just had to put Jan on a plane back to London - a rather tearful parting. She was an unwitting bystander to my spat with Klingman on the video link - he didn't know that she was within earshot (and wouldn't have cared if he had). As you know I don't mind a bit of a scrap but from her point of view it must have seemed as if I was rapidly escalating a situation that could have serious consequences for her and the kids. And she didn't make a fuss at the time. But she must be somewhere over Nevada at the moment wondering what the future holds. Since we got the extension put on the house last year the mortgage payments have shot up and the housing market is starting to fall - not a great time to be looking for another job. And despite the cut and thrust of life in the fast lane (!) what we do affects our families - I don't want them to suffer for my bloodymindedness and she got a firsthand glimpse of that an hour ago.

I catch a flight to Karachi in a couple of hours. There's an entrepreneur there who runs of all things carparks - so it should be an easy sell though not perhaps as lucrative as the last 2 opportunities. Could you call the suppliers keep them steady and tell them we're very close to getting a deal tied down. Obviously if New York get onto you then you'll need to co-operate - no sense in us all getting fired!

Mike

Questions to consider

Read through the verses of Daniel 3: whole chapter

42. What areas in your place of work would you define as no go resignation areas?
43. Do you think we can extrapolate from the story about the 3 friends to a general work situation? Why?
44. Have you ever said no?
45. Is there a way of saying no? How can we refuse graciously?
46. On what grounds can you put your own principles before those of the company you work for? Is it OK to delegate it to some one else in the same company so you don't have to do it?
47. If our own principles have an adverse effect on others such as our family do you think we owe it to them to compromise?

Briefing to group leader

This study returns to the Old Testament and for a second time to the book of Daniel - this time to the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refuse to bow down to the gold statue of the king. Interestingly these are their Babylonian names see Dan 1:7 - Daniel whose Babylonian name was Belteshazzar, is always called by his Hebrew name. Does this tell us anything about how they behaved - usually compliant except for this occasion? In the earlier Moses study we had a leader who won a deliverance for his people by holding his ground. This study is about risking everything because of a principle on which you are not prepared to compromise. The major themes are the grounds of no compromise - when this is and secondly whether we should compromise if it affects those who depend on us. The group may want to spiritualise about issues where faith is directly compromised for example working on Sundays perhaps - business ethics is much broader these days for unbelievers also so you might gently suggest that they need to think more broadly about the application of the 3 friends and the fiery furnace story. The other danger is that people start to swap anecdotes or stories about people they know - the best way to obtain value from the study is to keep it real - to establish whether people have no go areas and how they go about protecting them.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 13: Corinth

Pulling the castles down

Jan love, I'm so sorry about the way the California trip ended. After all the pressures of the last few weeks it seemed like an ideal way to spend some time together and I hope that despite the way it ended you enjoyed California. I'm also sorry you had to be a bystander on my row with Saul Klingman over the video link. Hearing your husband having a stand up row with his boss isn't exactly the most reassuring thing you wanted to hear before getting the plane back to London. But I want you to understand why I'm taking the stand I am. Because it affects you and the kids. The plain facts of the matter are that I have 48 hours to find an alternative to Ralph. Klingman will be doing his best to close the deal with Ralph in my absence so it's a race against the clock. By the way contrary to what I said earlier he's not sending anybody else - he's going to see Ralph himself - so there isn't a lot of time left.

As you know my work involves creating and managing ideas. Inevitably a lot fall by the wayside but when a campaign or a programme or promotion flies it makes a difference - it makes money, it can even change people's lives. Though I'm under no illusions; I'm selling soap powder here not healing lepers! And I'm sure I've spoken to you before about how bizarre it can be when I think back a year and find it hard to remember what I was working on and why it took up so much of my energies and my time. But just because my work is disposable doesn't mean it doesn't matter. When an idea flies it takes on a life of its own - and it becomes independent of me. But the downside is that there can be negative effects - it may not work as intended, it may even be misused. But that doesn't mean I can claim that it is no longer my responsibility. If I ever get to the point where it feels like "Another day another dollar" it'll be time to get out.

Do you remember when we went on that business trip to Athens back in 1997? And that day we drove down the coast to Corinth - the ancient city lying beneath the hill on which the Corinthian Acropolis stood? The townspeople always knew that they could retreat to the fortress and be impregnable and self-sufficient for months - and that afternoon we walked up the hill and saw the water cisterns and the fortifications.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about tearing down their strongholds I know what he meant. Yes I could wash my hands of the whole thing - to say it doesn't matter what Ralph and his people do with it - all I have to do is say yet and next quarter's figures are taken care of - I come home a hero. But the promotion would have a life of its own, it would go somewhere I didn't want it to go and it will make a difference. For Paul wherever there was a pocket of resistance, a handhold where people could keep a part of themselves at arms length from God his response was to tear it down. He saw the independent spirit of the Corinthians as profoundly

destructive to everything he had worked for and threatened to fight implacably against it. Now perhaps you think this is a ludicrous comparison the apostle writing to a church he planted versus me and what is basically a mechanic for getting more people to use shopping centres but if the work is worth doing then it's worth doing well. And I believe Ralph will abuse it. If my work matters then I have to protect it against misuse.

Now I know this opens me up to accusations of arrogance and control freakery - and I'm aware that I'm part of a team - it's not just my idea - and I know that these decisions will affect us as a family if Klingman decides I'm too much of a liability and cuts me loose. But if I just sat by and let it happen I would be false to myself. If I can find a client who will use the idea well and in a way that doesn't exploit people and their weaknesses I will be satisfied.

I'd better get some sleep - I'm just finishing this on the laptop on the plane we're about an hour out from Singapore and from there it should be a straightforward transfer to the plane for Karachi. The guy I have to see there runs a car park business across much of Pakistan, India and in the Gulf. Apparently he has Arab friends with deep pockets to fund him into expanding into the US. I meet him tomorrow morning at midday. I've gained a day by flying across the international dateline but with Saul Klingman on the case I'll be lucky to get the full 48 hours he promised.

I just want to reassure you that it's going to be all right - nothing like a challenge to get the adrenalin flowing! Give the kids a hug from me.

All my love

Mike

Questions to consider

Read through the verses of II Corinthians 10: 1-8

48. What are the limits of your responsibility at work? At point can you say it is no longer my problem?
49. Is your work important? Do you think it matters to God?
50. How do you cope with the disposability of much office work? Is that a problem for you? Do you pray the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90:17
Establish the work of our hands?
51. What is there in your work that is lasting?
52. When Paul talks about pulling down strongholds in the Corinthian passage what strongholds is he talking about? How does he do it?
53. What strongholds are you aware of that you ought to pull down - and are there any in the workplace? Is this personal or do you have a responsibility to others to do this?
54. There's a danger that Mike is rather taking matters into his own hands. Is he right to take such a strong line? When is it appropriate to be confrontational and when to be conciliatory?

Briefing to group leader

This study moves on from the confrontation with the client and his boss to a much more personal explanation to his wife for why he has taken the stand he has - given that there will be consequences on Jan and the children if Mike loses his job. There are several key themes here that of the significance of work - work that is often disposable, when our responsibility for our work ends (if ever) and whether we need to be vigorous in ensuring that our work is used appropriately. The Corinthian passage can easily be spiritualised into a personal spiritual matter (overcoming personal sin) or a pastoral issue between an apostle and a church he has planted which needs pulling back in line. This will be a stretch but if our work has any eternal value, and if our work matters to God then part of our work may entail protecting it. But there may also be some in your group who feel that Mike is being unnecessarily "precious" and can quite understand the irritation of his boss (and his own wife?) as he sticks his head above the parapet.

Emails from Hotel Babylon 14: The Great Whore

Are my hands clean?

Jan yes it's me again. More despatches from the front. I've been in Karachi nearly 18 hours and though I could really do with a decent night's sleep the jet lag won't let me. But I wanted to catch up with you because a lot has happened and I need to download it.

The good news is that the meetings with Zafar have gone well. I've impressed upon him the urgency of getting a contract signed. He's obviously worried that I'm trying to move him along too fast and that this is a classic negotiating ploy. But I feel Klingman on my heels - he hasn't a lot to do to get this deal signed and sealed and I have only a few hours left. Zafar has been in consultation with his backers through the afternoon and evening and I'm confident that if we can get the whole thing signed first thing tomorrow morning then it's sorted. When I spoke to him an hour ago he thought that it was 90% certain to go through. I've given him a little ground on the margin as a sweetener in return for the risks of rushing into this. But he is keen to expand into the US and this car park promotion could be the one thing that persuades mall owners to let him manage the car parks. So we both get what we want. What I like about this deal is that unlike the preceding ones this is simple. Zafar wants to run car parks - that's all there is to it. No hidden agendas no sharp practice as far as I can see. Which suits me fine.

The other part is a lot stranger and hard to explain. The truth is it's left me quite unsettled - though perhaps jetlag has something to do with it. When I finished for the day I got a cab back to the Hotel Babylon and then because I had time I went for a stroll. Pakistan never ever stops - even at 8 at night the streets are heaving with cars, scooters and people. And after walking through a street market I paused in a street corner café for a drink. When a young man came up and struck up a conversation. This isn't unusual here. When you're a foreigner you get pestered all the time.

He was an Islamic fundamentalist. And it became quite clear that whether or not he worked for Zafar's company he knew why I was in Karachi. He explained to me that the promotion was not suitable, that it was un-Islamic because the Koran forbids gambling. I countered that the promotion was at the outset designed only to be run in the US so wouldn't be run in Islamic countries and in case people could make their own choice. I then asked him why he didn't take it up with Zafar since it was Zafar's call whether his company ran it. His reply was that Zafar already knew but that I also needed to be aware of the kinds of pressures big Western companies were putting on Islamic companies. It was also my responsibility. According to him Muslims everywhere were being put under pressure because Western corporations had no respect for local practices. He concluded by saying that I should leave the country and take the promotion with me. I asked him if he was threatening me to which he didn't reply.

Obviously I'm concerned and you'll probably think I should have gone straight to Zafar. I haven't because I don't want to add anything that might make this deal come unstuck at the last moment. The interesting thing is that the debate was not unlike the one I had back in Atlanta with Lester's mother and pastor. They too objected and on religious grounds. At the time I put it all down to hypocrisy. But this time I found myself on the wrong side of the argument - I'm actually very sympathetic to this activist - he's got his principles and he's trying to live by them. What I have never really grasped before is that others may see what I do and how I do it very differently. I've always assumed that I'm one of the good guys. I keep my word, I don't steal or cheat, and I try to deal fairly. But from the perspective of a Muslim in the third world it is clear that I'm the enemy - and that we could never negotiate on equal terms because of the power of the company behind me. According to him in the end I would do whatever the company wanted whatever my personal principles.

For the first time I think I understood that passage in the book of Revelation of Babylon the prostitute who is described as the great city ruling the kings of the earth. For John who wrote it - it must have represented Rome. For me it's about a global trading economy - something that is central to my life and work. For me globalisation has led to fantastic opportunities - even if it seems I seem to spend most of my life in airport transit lounges. And Revelation 17 describes a global civilisation that lives to trade and to generate wealth. Only there is darker side of greed and violence. And the prophecy continues that one day, despite all the apparent security this civilisation will be overthrown. I've always assumed there's a right and proper way to do business. But right now I'm wondering if I can ever be sure about the consequences my work has for other people. The scale of what I do is potentially huge - how can I be responsible for every part of it?

Now I know I sound as if I'm bleating like some bleeding heart liberal - and part of me says that it's naïve to cast the west as the villains and to the rest of the world as victims. But I know there are downsides to our way of life - trade barriers, pollution, and waste. But because they don't affect me directly I can turn a blind eye to them. And I can impugn the motives of who do protest as misguided and obstructive. Is this young man entitled to have his country free from gaming? Is a country entitled to vote for Sha'ria law? Or do we require they do things our way? Anyway he's right. I've come too far to stop at this point - in a few hours I'll close the sale and be on my way back to you. He's got me rattled though.

I need to email Rob to sort out some details before tomorrow morning. And to tell Klingman the contract's virtually in the bag. It won't be long now - I'm really looking forward to seeing you and the kids. Love you lots.

Mike

[Reuters 11am local time. A British businessman is believed to have been abducted in Karachi this morning. Witnesses saw him being bundled into a car. Consular officials are trying to make contact. No ransom demand has been made. STOP]

Questions to consider

Read through the verses of Revelation 17 whole chapter

55. As an exercise could you write down on one side of a sheet of paper all the good things your organisation does for society in its work. On the other side write down the bad effects of what your company does. How much of your time and the company's time is given to each of the items on both sides of your piece of paper. Why is this?
56. Could Mike still pull out of the deal if it went against his convictions and still be a good employee?
57. Do you agree with Mike's pessimistic view that it's not possible to have clean hands?
58. How as a Christian is it possible to live in a global economy where there is such a divide between the powerful and the powerless. What should our response be?
59. Are our organisations irredeemable? What can we do about it?
60. What is your responsibility as a Christian to your colleagues? What is your responsibility as a Christian for your organisation?
61. Now you have completed the series, how would you characterise a Christian's responsibilities to be a Christian at work. Should you be fully engaged, detached or semi detached?!

Briefing to group leader

This is the final study in the series when Mike is forced to confront what he does and to recognise that others may have a different point of view. The Bible passage is about the whore of Babylon - a series that has taken us through the wicked cities of the Bible has to end here with the mother of all wicked cities. Now there are other interpretations of this chapter though the group shouldn't get distracted by these. The interpretation I have taken is that this woman represents a global civilisation of buying and selling which is idolatrous and violent and hostile to God. There is also a hint that there is no escaping Babylon. One way or another we are all involved whether we like it or not. So this is one of the most negative studies because it asks the question Are my hands clean? As a believer trying to live out my faith at work, am I part of the solution or do I have to recognise that I am also part of the problem? One of my cues for this study was a question by a friend of mine Richard Briggs a Bible college lecturer who asked Is it possible to be a Christian in the West? The book of Revelation gives a wonderful answer of the city of God coming down from heaven as God recreates and transforms. But overall Revelation is very pessimistic about the world we live in.