

1 Kings 18

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[0 : 00] I would like you for a few moments this evening to turn back to the passage that we read in the Old Testament in the first book of Kings chapter 18.

1 Kings 18 and looking at the phrase at the end of the third verse, which is the beginning of our parentheses, Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord.

Or literally, this phrase would read, Obadiah feared the Lord greatly.

I think it's important for us to remember that although we are living today, some almost 3,000 years after Elijah, nevertheless we are in the same life's journey that he was engaged in.

The whole history of the human race is a journey and that journey is moving towards its fulfillment, towards its consummation, and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the judgment of the world.

[1 : 27] And we are part of that story, part of that journey, and just as Elijah was. The only difference is Elijah was there some centuries before us.

There's a very real sense in which these men and women of faith in the Old Testament are our spiritual relatives. And we are to think of them not as people who are distant from us, but as people rather who are near us.

And that's why it's very helpful sometimes to look at a particular personality or a particular character in the biblical story. Because that story, the biblical story, which gives an account of this journey, is a story which is not yet finished.

The Bible is complete, but the story is not yet finished, because the Bible points forward to the consummation of that story. And the story which the Bible gives an account of is a story which continues to fulfill the purposes of God's kingdom in the world.

And we are part of that story. And therefore, we are engaged on this journey. Now, Elijah was one of the great heavyweights, if you like, of the Old Testament.

[2 : 55] What he achieved in this chapter, there on Carmel, matches in sheer courage and determination what Moses did before Pharaoh and what David achieved before Goliath.

Here we see extraordinary spiritual power being granted to Elijah. And through that power, he convinced the nation of Israel on the summit of Mount Carmel that the Lord is the living God.

That he is not a dying and rising vegetation deity such as Baal. And that the Lord achieves his purposes through his word, not through the sexual rituals of Canaanite religion.

So, Elijah is a giant among the prophets. One of the great heroes of the Bible. One of those people whose story God has recounted for us, in order that they might inspire us, that they might encourage us and help us.

Of course, it's important to recognize, as this chapter at the beginning helps us to recognize, that Elijah, although he achieved much by the power of the Spirit of God, did not achieve it alone.

[4 : 25] There were others involved. We know from other chapters in this book, and in the following book, the second book of Kings, of the schools of the prophets, who were faithful to the Lord, and who helped prophets like Elijah and Elisha.

The prophets of Elijah, the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and the schools of the prophets, deal with, are covered in this, two-thirds of this book.

The first, which is really one book, the first and second book of Kings. Two-thirds of the book is devoted to them. And that's, I think, an indication of how important they are to the working out of the divine drama of redemption.

And of course, not only was there the school of the prophets, there was also people like Obadiah. And I would like us tonight to look at Obadiah, because so often he is lost in the shadow of Elijah.

And yet, there are lessons that we can learn from the lesser characters, just as there are lessons that we can learn from the great characters of the Bible. Obadiah was not a prophet, but yet he played a vital role in the Israelite resistance to Baalism.

[5 : 52] First of all, by hiding and sustaining the prophets from Jezebel's death squads. That was no mean feat to hide a hundred prophets, and to feed them, and in this way to look after them.

And secondly, he played a vital role in acting as an intermediary between Elijah and Ahab, as we've seen in our reading tonight. And as such, he helped to set up the meeting which agreed that there would be a confrontation on Mount Carmel, which was a turning point in the history of the Old Testament.

Now, I think the important thing for us to notice tonight, first of all, is that Elijah and Obadiah were very different types of people. Very, very different. Their partnership was a real partnership, but it was a disparate partnership.

They were not natural buddies. It was a case, perhaps of little and large. Obadiah's name means servant of the Lord, and it is not an uncommon name in the Old Testament.

He was one among many. But in the Old Testament narrative, there is only one Elijah. His name means, My God is the Lord, and comes across with a force that Obadiah's name lacks.

[7 : 21] Charles Spurgeon, in one of his sermons on Elijah and Obadiah, says this, I suspect, he says, that Elijah did not think very much of Obadiah.

He does not treat him with any great consideration, but addresses him more sharply than one would expect from a fellow believer. Elijah was a man of action, bold, always to the front, with nothing to conceal.

Obadiah was a quiet believer, true and steadfast, but in a very difficult position, and therefore driven to his duty in a less open manner.

Now, Elijah and Obadiah provide us with a fascinating study of partnership in the service of the kingdom of God.

partnership between two very different individuals. And this study is not only fascinating, it is also relevant, because the Church of Christ is heterogeneous.

[8 : 24] The Church of Christ has many different types of personality types. The Church of Jesus Christ, each branch and each local manifestation of the Church of Christ should have a cross-section of psychology, a cross-section of social types and social classes.

We are called to work together with all different types of people. A few, about thirty years ago, in the United States especially, there was a lot of talk about what was called the homogeneous principle, that the Churches would grow fastest and better if they were focused on different personality types and social classes.

And that there should be a middle class church and a working class church and so on and so forth. But when we look at the New Testament, that is not the picture that we find.

We find, in the New Testament, we find free people and slaves and Paul tells us that there is neither bond nor free in Christ. And I think that we are called to represent that heterogeneity that we see in the New Testament.

Even the twelve disciples that Jesus called to serve him were very disparate or a heterogeneous group. And yet, after the resurrection of Jesus, they formed one of the most effective partnerships that the world has seen.

[9 : 58] So, I think there are lessons for us here because we always face the challenge of confusing fellowship with what we might call cronyism or baddism.

And what the Bible teaches us is that Christian fellowship includes all. Not just those we consider are baddies, not just those we think of as cronies.

It includes all. And whether we get on well or whether we get on not so well with others, we are all part of the fellowship of the body of Christ.

So, with that in mind, let's look very briefly tonight at Obadiah and Elijah. The first lesson or the first point that I want to point out is that they inhabited different spheres in very, very different backgrounds.

Obadiah, first of all, he was a royal administrator. He was an official in Ahab's palace and probably the other royal properties in addition to the palace in Samaria.

[11 : 08] We are told that he was the governor of Ahab's house. And this is an office that is frequently mentioned in the books of Kings.

He was an important position. He is an important functionary. The fact that he was able to occupy such a high position in the royal household which was so committed to the paganization of the country and at the same time retain his spiritual integrity is quite remarkable.

It's a challenge to every civil servant, every Christian civil servant on earth. Civil servants like other functionaries do face these temptations because we live in a fallen and in a sinful world.

But this man, he fulfilled a position of high responsibility and yet he was a devout believer in the Lord. He feared the Lord greatly.

So he was a man of privilege. He enjoyed privilege. He was a top civil servant. He knew the corridors of power in Samaria. Very different from Elijah.

[12 : 18] Elijah was a Tishbite, a man of the desert. He came from the eastern side of the Jordan which is considered very often to be almost a second class part of the promised land.

There was a sense in which he was very much on the fringe of the kingdom of Israel. He was at home in the stillness of the Jordanian desert and in the company of ravens.

It's possible that he may well have followed the nomadic lifestyle similar to the Bedouin of today. In contrast with Obadiah who knew what it was to live in the palace of a king, Elijah was brought up among the marginalized and the powerless in Israelite society.

while Obadiah ate in the royal palace in Samaria, Elijah belonged to a people who almost certainly had to scratch a living among the poor.

And although the Lord looked after him at Kareth and at Zarephath, he was surrounded by poverty and hunger. The fact that the population that Elijah belonged to lived in poverty, I think, comes out clearly in the light of verse 5 where we see Ahab's treatment of his rural subjects.

[13 : 45] After three years of drought, he was searching for hay to feed his horses and his mules. They were crucial to keeping viable and mobile his large chariot regiment. He had a great chariot regiment.

Other writers tell us this. Shalmaneser III, Emperor of Assyria, tells us that Ahab had at least 2,000 chariots. Now he had a lot of horses to maintain.

But notice how he no scruples from going and really expropriating what little of the precious grass and hay that remained from local farmers and croctors.

His horses were more important. than people. The preservation of his cracked chariot regiment was a more concern to him than the survival of his peasant people.

Such a situation of ongoing exploitation by Ahab was the sphere in which Elijah lived. There's a sense in which Obadiah saw Israelite society from above whereas Israelite society saw it from beneath.

[15 : 00] It's like a mechanic from the driver of a car. The driver of a car sees the car from above. The mechanic sees it from underneath. Elijah was a man from below.

He was a man whom God called from his purity, called from the fringes of society to be one of his most noted and most used servants in the history of the kingdom of God.

And yet the Lord called both of these men. He called the Lord Chamberlain from the royal palace and the nomadic pastoralists from Tishby to be partners together. And the Lord still rejoices in weaving our many diversities into a pattern.

of piety, of love, and of justice, which he asks us to establish in human society.

Paul tells us that in the outworking of God's will and in the life of the church, there is neither bond nor free, as we have seen. The fact that was taken seriously in the life of the early church, where we know that even those who were slaves could become bishops or pastors in the church.

[16 : 18] There was literally neither bond nor free. So, Obadiah and Elijah really inhabited different social spheres.

But there was a further difference. They seemed to have inherited different psyches, different personalities. Obadiah was a man of routine, good order, and due process.

He apparently was a very gifted organiser. He was a natural manager. He got things done efficiently and effectively. He must have been exceptionally good at his work in order to gain and to retain his influential position, despite not being an explicit follower of Baal.

It would appear that he was utterly dependable. Ab knew the everyday affairs of his household were safe in such expert hands as his. And no doubt Obadiah kept all the records of the royal household carefully filed away in the clay tablet archives.

He could locate each one at a moment's notice. And yet, although this man was noted for his efficiency, yet faith was his top priority.

[17 : 37] He feared the Lord, he tells us, since he was a boy. And now that he had become a man, we read that he feared the Lord greatly. The piety that had been born in him as a boy grew and developed.

So when he came to this position of responsibility, he feared the Lord. Not only feared the Lord, but feared him greatly. At great risk to himself, he hid and fed a hundred prophets during one of Jezebel's sinister pogroms.

He was a brave man, but he probably was a man of caution. Elijah, on the other hand, was very different. If Abadiah was a manager, Elijah was a leader.

Elijah appears as a much more charismatic figure. He thrived when he had faced the unexpected, not when he was enveloped in routine. He was a man of action, rather than a man of process, an innovator rather than a conformist.

When filled with the Spirit of God, he became totally free, throwing caution to the wind. He enters the story in the first book of Kings abruptly in the first verse of chapter 17, in order to deliver a bombshell message to the king.

- [19 : 02] He predicts a long drought that would rapidly plunge the then prosperous economy of the country into severe recession. So behind the drought was an economic recession, because that's what was caused by the drought, because it was an agrarian economy, and if there was no rain, if there was drought, the economy was in trouble.

And so this was a bombshell for Ahab. And Elijah comes from nowhere and delivers this message to Ahab, the king.

But no sooner had he made this dramatic entry and announcement to the king, than he leaves with equally abruptly, and for three years disappears without trace, despite the most strenuous searches authorized by the king.

Then we read at the beginning of chapter 17, after a long time, he reappears out of the blue to Obadiah. And Obadiah attempts to start a conversation with him and says, is it really you, my lord, Elijah?

And that's a rather polite way of speaking, of meeting someone. But Elijah has no time for preliminary niceties or small talk.

- [20 : 25] He gets straight to the point with an almost brutal bluntness announcing his message, go, tell your master, Elijah is here.

Here is the peasant from the desert fringes of the kingdom, summoning the king to appear before him. Here he was breaking all known protocol of the time.

Here was a prophet from the desert demanding that the king have audience with him. And so I think it is true, as Spurgeon has said, that these men had different psychies, different personalities.

They were disparate people. And yet they created a strategic partnership in the service of the kingdom of God. Obadiah introduces himself quietly as a servant of the Lord.

Elijah, on the other hand, would probably look you straight in the eye and lay saying a loud voice, My God is the Lord.

- [21 : 37] Now one of the challenges that we face in the church today is that the Elijahs and the Obadiahs might work together, as they did then. And the church must recognize, or ought to recognize, that we are called to work in partnership together, even if we have different personalities and come from different social backgrounds.

Paul tells us, concerning the church in Corinth, that there were times when the whole church came together. There may have been different house churches in Corinth, almost certainly there were, as there quite clearly was in Rome, as we see from the last chapter of the letter to the Romans.

But Paul emphasizes that although there may be different small groups of people meeting, there was a time when they would all come together and work together in the service of the kingdom of God.

And this brings me to the third and the final point. We've already noticed that they came from different social backgrounds, different social spheres, that they are different people, different psychologies, but they formed a partnership, that they worked in different ways, but they worked in different ways, but ways which didn't diverge, but ways which reinforced one another.

They had different strategies and yet there was an overall overarching aspect to the way in which they worked together. The key objective of both was the same, to resist the paganization of the nation and to promote faith in the Lord.

[23 : 21] But they were called to follow different strategies. Obadiah was, I suppose today we would call him a gradualist. He remained within the establishment in order to influence it from the inside.

He saw his ministry as that of salt, acting as a preservative to slow down the corruption of true worship and the inversion of moral values. His role was a gradualist.

His strategy was to be one of infiltration. Like Joseph in the court of Pharaoh, Daniel among the advisors to Nebuchadnezzar and the saints of whom St.

Paul tells us were in Nero's household. Now it's important to recognize that Nehemiah fulfilled this role with high integrity. He did not compromise his spirituality or his faith.

He feared the Lord greatly, we read. His witness may have been quiet and discreet, but it was totally without compromise. Elijah, on the other hand, was not in any way a gradualist.

[24 : 28] I suppose we might call him an immediatist. He was a man of action. He appears in the narrative abruptly, possibly because he was called unexpectedly to be a prophet.

But once called to enter the public stage, he obviously throws his heart and soul into the struggle against Baal. If the strategy of Obadiah was infiltration, that of Elijah was one of confrontation.

He was a man of great faith and a formidable prayer warrior. His prayer on Mount Carmel is one of the most urgent and powerful in the entire scriptures. And in the New Testament we learn in the letter of James that his prayers were instrumental, not only in ending the drought but also in producing it.

Now Elijah was a man of enormous gravitas, a man of great spiritual power. He spoke of the Lord Almighty in verse 15, before whom I stand, the Lord whom I serve.

And here we see Elijah, the greatness of his personality, endowed with the power of the Spirit of God, dominating the king. you can almost see Ahab quaking before this man of God, this powerful man of God.

[25 : 46] We see as we read in the latter part of the chapter how he humiliated the prophets of Baal, how he reclaimed the nation for the Lord.

And so these men were very different and they fulfilled different roles but the role of each reinforced the other. They weren't working against one another and I think it's important for us to recognize that.

That's not to say that they didn't misunderstand one another. It's quite clear that they didn't misunderstand one another. Obadiah was aghast at the idea of acting as intermediary between Elijah and Ahab.

The thought terrified him. Three times in the dialogue he says, Ahab, he will kill me. Verse 9, verse 12, verse 14. Obadiah felt that to do what Elijah demanded would be to sign his own death warrant.

Elijah, he said, is so unpredictable, so elusive that the king would not believe that Elijah would remain in that place until he got there. In addition, Ahab might well regard Obadiah's failure to bring in Elijah in chains immediately as a capital offense.

[26 : 57] Obadiah also seems to have felt unappreciated by Elijah because he protests that Elijah's request is discouraging.

He said, I've been a devoted believer in the Lord since I was a boy. He expresses his exasperation that Elijah appears not to know that Obadiah risked his career and his life to save a hundred prophets when Jezebel sought to massacre them.

And so initially there appears to be an impasse between them but it did not last for long. Because Elijah recognizes Obadiah's fears.

He doesn't, although he was a man of power, he does not ride rough shod over Obadiah. He pauses and he recognizes that Elijah, that Obadiah may have a point.

And he reconfirms by solemn oath in verse 15 because that's what the words there signify. He takes an oath and he reconfirms his intention to present himself to that very day.

[28 : 03] So he, in this way, he meets the objection of Obadiah and he confirms that he will indeed meet the king. And immediately Obadiah recognizes, he reconsiders rather his refusal.

And so he accepts the word of Elijah. He accepts what he's given him oath. And so we read in verse 16 that Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him.

So these men were very different and although they were going about things in very different ways, yet they in a measure conceded to one another in order that the will of the Lord might be done.

And in this way, I think, they present to us a model. One does not insist in getting his own way. They find via media. They find a way of working together.

And that's how we must always do in the Church of God. We must recognize that we are a disparate fellowship. We must not allow our disparateness to make us dysfunctional.

[29 : 10] The Church is disparate but it's not dysfunctional. At least it ought not to be. And the great danger in any congregation is it can easily become dysfunctional. And we do not work with one another and we begin to work against one another rather than giving and taking in order to seek God's way forward.

And so in conclusion, just let me summarize what we have learned about Obadiah and Elijah. They inhabited different social spheres. They inherited different psychologies from their parents.

And they fulfilled different roles in the kingdom of God but fulfilled them in such a way that they reinforced one another and literally served the kingdom. One was by no means a rubber stamp of the other.

They were very different but yet they worked in such a way that they reinforced one another and helped the kingdom of God to come in ancient Israel. Obadiah, as Charles Scurgeon said, he must have had to walk very delicately and watch his words most carefully.

I do not wonder that he became a very cautious person and was even a little afraid of Elijah. Another commentator has said concerning Elijah, there is nothing tentative about Elijah.

[30 : 34] He allows for no contingencies, no exceptions, no escape clauses. And yet, they work together because God called them.

Their partnership may have been disparate but it was not this functional. The cause they served was greater than their differences. In fact, their different backgrounds, different personalities, different skills, different strategies helped them to reinforce the witness of one another.

They complemented one another in presence and proclamation, godly example and prophetic courage, infiltration and confrontation. through their cooperation, working together, they achieved a meeting between Elijah and Ahab at which the king agreed to hold a national assembly in Mount Carmel, an assembly which becomes a high water mark in the outworking of God's purposes of redemption in the Old Testament, an assembly which succeeded in re-establishing the worship of the Lord in Israel and delivering a decisive setback to the worship of Baal from which it never fully recovered.

Now that was the work of God, undoubtedly, but it was the work of God through two people who were very different but yet who worked together in the service of the kingdom.

And our God tonight is the God of Elijah. He's the God of Obadiah and he wants to use us with all our distinctivenesses, with all our idiosyncrasies.

[32 : 17] He wants to use us so that we might work together to help the kingdom of God to come. May God grant that what God did on Mount Carmel, he may do in Aberdeen, he may do in Scotland, that we may see the kingdom of God come with power in our generation.

But God's kingdom when it comes will come through people like Elijah and Obadiah, people like you, like me.

to come out to who