

God's Man on the Inside

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[0 : 00] Turn with me then to the chapter that we read together, 1 Kings chapter 18. I'll read from the beginning once again, 1 Kings 18, page 358.

After many days, the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth. So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab.

Now the famine was severe in Samaria, and Ahab called Obadiah, who was over his household.

Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.

This week I attended an in-service training course in Edinburgh at our headquarters in Edinburgh, along with about another 25 ministers or so from all over the free church.

And it really was a very special time, very useful time of listening to various lectures and seminars and workshops and coming together in fellowship and in prayer.

[1 : 19] It really was a very important time and a very precious time. And one of the workshops that we attended was on how to preach the characters of the Bible.

The Bible is all about people. It's about men and women, individual people who God uses for various purposes in his kingdom. And we were all divided into groups, and each group had to construct notes for a sermon on various characters that we were given.

None of us were given Obadiah, but it did remind me of the importance of focusing from time to time on various characters of the Bible.

Some of these characters are well known. You have Abraham, you have Moses, you have David. And I'm quite sure that most of us will know most detail about their lives.

But there are some characters who are key to the story of the Old Testament and who are not as well known. And that is because they played more of a supportive role rather than a leading role.

[2 : 25] And one of the things that was pointed out to us was the importance of drawing out and recognizing those who supported the kingdom.

Perhaps in the background and perhaps unknown to anyone else except a few. And Obadiah is one of these characters. He's one of the unsung heroes of the Bible.

We don't know a lot about him. But what we do know is the most important information of all, which arose out of verse 3.

He feared the Lord greatly. And if I was to choose how people would remember me after I leave this world, I think I would choose something like that.

Is that not the best testimony that anyone could give you in this world and remember you by? Not necessarily what you were just like to other people.

[3 : 34] That's important. Or even what you achieved in this world. That's important as well. But surely the greatest of all testimony is how we were in relation to the Lord.

And what a fantastic testimony this man left. What a wonderful thing for anyone to say about another human being was that he feared the Lord.

Not just that he feared the Lord, but that he feared the Lord greatly. In other words, there was no hypocrisy with him.

He feared the Lord with all his heart, wholeheartedly. It meant that he listened. Now remember that when the Bible talks about fearing God, it's not the kind of fear that makes you stop and dread.

It's not the kind of fear that makes you wish that God wasn't there. That's one kind of fear. It's more of a dread. But when someone fears the Lord, it's a different kind of fear.

[4 : 39] It's a fear that loves. In which God draws you to himself. It's a fear that comes reverently by all means, but at the same time joyfully into the presence of God.

And the more you see and discover of God, the more you want of God. The more you hunger after God, the more hunger that God gives you. That's what it means to fear God.

It means that Obadiah heard God's word. That he loved God's message. It means that he received God. Remember, that's what it means to hear God's word is to receive it.

You can hear God's word and it goes in one ear, out the other. That's not really what hearing God's word is. But when you truly hear God's message, it means that you receive it into your heart.

And that you obey it. That you submit to it. That you recognize that God is speaking not just to someone else, but he's speaking to you. I wonder how many, I hope that most of us here today are those for whom it can be said, you fear the Lord.

[5 : 49] A fear in God in the New Testament was to understand what Jesus did on the cross in giving himself as the sacrifice once for all to pay the price for our sin.

And to believe and to trust in him with all our heart. That's what it means to fear the Lord. But there was obviously something about Obadiah which made that fear of God very visible.

Because it said of him that he feared the Lord greatly. He was 100% committed to the Lord. Now that's what God demands of everyone. And I hope that not only will that be the testimony and the description of our lives.

But that it will be how people will remember us and how people will think of us. I can't think of any greater description of anyone's life than to fear the Lord greatly.

But here's the bit. Here's the strange thing. You would expect a man like that not to have anything to do with a king who is so wicked as Ahab.

[7 : 03] Look at what the Bible says. That's why I read chapter 16 where we're introduced to Ahab, son of Obadi, began to reign over Israel. And Ahab, son of Obadi, reigned in Israel for 22 years and needed evil in the sight of the Lord.

But that's not enough. More, he says, than all who were before him. And if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Neba, he took for his wife Jezebel, who was a notorious woman.

You read the rest of the story, you find out how notoriously wicked and cruel this woman was. The daughter of Ethbal, king of Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him.

But that's one thing. But what happened was, of course, that once she came onto the throne with Ahab, she brought in her baggage with her from the Sidonians. And she influenced the people of Israel even more than they had been influenced in the past.

And they began to depart from God and worship Baal, the god of the Sidonians. And he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Siberia. And Ahab made an Asherah.

[8 : 06] And Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the god of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. Now, that's the description of Obadiah's boss. Is that the kind of house that you would expect a man who fears the Lord greatly to be in charge of?

Not only to work. He wasn't just some kind of horseman or something like that. He was in charge of the household of Ahab. It's astonishing, isn't it?

You wouldn't expect that. And yet, what it tells us is that God has his servants in the most unexpected places.

You remember Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen king. At least, when he captured Daniel and made him one of his servants. And yet, that is Daniel was one of the most faithful.

He wasn't just a servant of God. He was an exemplary servant of God. And he was in the household of Nebuchadnezzar. And he rose through the ranks.

[9 : 14] Nebuchadnezzar recognized his gifts and his qualities and his faithfulness and his diligence. And he rose through the ranks to be in charge of many, many areas. The same is true for Joseph.

Pharaoh wasn't a Christian. He was a heathen king. And yet, Joseph was elevated to the position of prime minister in Egypt as a person who served and feared the Lord.

And there are loads of people in the Bible who you can say the same thing about. Paul says that there were those of Caesar's household who were Christians. And who worked away in the background serving the Lord, faithful to him, obeying him.

And Esther was someone similar. Ahasuerus was not a Christian, as far as we know, at least at first. But then he... And Esther was a person who, as far as we can detect, was someone who was faithful to the Lord.

The Bible is full of God's people in the most unexpected places, even on the other side of the enemy line.

[10:22] Ahab was an enemy of God. He has a sworn enemy of God. He had not only departed from God, but he had nailed his colors to the mass when he married Jezebel.

And when he brought her in and established Baal worship as the national religion of Israel. And having done so, he proceeded, or rather she proceeded, to get rid of the prophets of the Lord and all those who were serving him.

And if they could have, they would have done anything possible to get rid of and to kill Elijah. It was only because God protected him that, in a most extraordinary way, that Elijah was spared.

This was the national religion of Samaria and Israel, Baal worship. Obadiah, then, is God's man on the inside.

It's rather like how important it was in the Second World War for there to be a resistance. For there to be people, in fact, there are those who say that the Second World War would have been very, very much more difficult to win if it hadn't been for those on the inside who were working behind enemy lines to subvert their cause.

[11:44] Obadiah is God's resistance, his man on the inside, his man behind enemy lines.

And I guess that, in a sense, that's true for all of us today. The Bible tells us we live in a world that is at variance with God.

It's more than that. It's at enmity with God, separate from God. And it's a world that is ruled by influences which are anti-God. Sometimes more than at other times.

And yet it is in that world that God expects his people to be and to live and to work and to witness for him. And Obadiah, I believe, is one of the finest examples of someone who lived and worked and served God from behind the enemy lines.

Now, you might say, look at the difference between Elijah and Obadiah. And that's one of the great lessons. That's one of the great features of this passage.

[12:59] This is the only passage, by the way, in which Obadiah is mentioned. This is not the Obadiah who wrote the book in the Old Testament. It was a different Obadiah. In fact, there were several Obadiahs in the Old Testament.

This is the only place that you find him. But look at the difference between Elijah and how God uses Elijah and the kind of person he was and Obadiah and the kind of person he was and the kind of way that God used him.

And some people are tempted to think that, well, when you look at the difference between the two of them, look at how in your face Elijah is. Absolutely no question he confronts Ahab.

He goes straight up to him and he says, this is what the Lord says. Meanwhile, Obadiah, he's in the background working secretly.

And some people have actually suggested that, well, Obadiah really wasn't as good as Elijah. He was a bit of a compromiser. He was a bit of a coward.

[14:03] And he should have been like Elijah. He should have had the bravery and the courage that Elijah had, even if it would mean that he was going to be put to death. Well, I don't know how anyone has any right to say that.

I don't think it's right to say that at all. I'm not saying it's right to compromise. It isn't. But there's no evidence in this passage that Obadiah ever compromised.

There's no evidence that he sinned in any way. He simply did his job. But he did it for the Lord.

There was no time at which he failed to do his job for the Lord.

He was working for an earthly boss. But he was working ultimately for a heavenly boss. The Lord himself, who is the master of all of us.

And there again, that is something that reminds us of our position in this world. We work for earthly masters, for earthly managers, to give a modern term, contemporary term.

[15:16] But ultimately, if we belong to Jesus Christ today, we ultimately work for him. And that doesn't mean to say that we are compromising by having a boss that isn't a Christian or working in a non-Christian environment.

The whole world is a non-Christian environment. The environment that Jesus lived and moved and worked in was a non-Christian environment. It's the same with the Apostle Paul.

But that didn't mean that he compromised in any way. The temptation is always to compromise. But just because we're tempted to do something doesn't mean that we actually will.

Well, I suppose we will. From time to time, we'll fall. We'll trip up and we'll backslide from time to time. And at times like this, we need to come back to the Lord. We need to repent and move on. So there's no evidence of compromise in Obadiah. He feared the Lord greatly. But what there is evidence of was because he feared the Lord greatly, it resulted in him loving God's people and doing whatever he could for them in the opportunities that God had given him.

[16:33] Now look at what he did. When Jezebel cut off the prophets in verse 4 of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.

Now I'll tell you, if he had ever been caught doing that, he would have been put to death right away. So please don't tell, don't suggest that Obadiah was a compromiser. He wasn't.

He did what he could with the opportunity. And what he saw was that God had placed him in a particular position where he was given opportunity to do what he could for the people of God in their need.

And so he did it. Just like Joseph. Just like Daniel. Just like Esther. They used their own position and they saw how God was leading them and guiding them in that position.

And they would have the courage and the skill and the opportunity to do it. Now that's what I call a hero. It may not be particularly spectacular.

[17:34] But I'll tell you, these prophets, to these prophets, Obadiah was a godsend. And they would have lived the rest of their lives thanking the Lord that he had saved them. When Jezebel was killing their contemporaries and their colleagues, Obadiah saved them.

And he put them in a cave for, put them in caves for apparently in that region. There's lots of caves. For three years, they lived in caves. That wouldn't have been a very pleasant existence. Especially just eating bread and water.

But I'm quite sure that these men were very thankful for that bread and water that God had. And they were thankful every day. And they lived every day as it came. That is a very important existence, isn't it?

To live each day at a time sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. And very often it's when God strips away our luxuries and makes us to see our necessities that we thank him more than when we live in luxury.

It's a very, very important lesson. But that's what these people had to learn. And it was all because of Obadiah's faithfulness to the Lord.

[18:46] Now when somebody, when we work in an unbelieving environment, as most of us, in fact, all of us have worked in an unbelieving environment. It is perfectly possible to thrive as a Christian.

Not just to survive, but to thrive as a Christian. And the challenge, of course, comes when someone asks you or tells you to do something that God forbids.

Or when somebody forbids you to do something that God commands. That's when the challenge comes. And that's when it comes time to nail our colors to the mast.

And that's, again, that's true for a great deal, for a great many people. And one has to use great wisdom and tact and skill and prayer in making our way and negotiating our way through these circumstances.

But there's no evidence in this passage to suggest that Obadiah ever compromised in that way. Now, there are two senses in which Obadiah is spoken about here.

[19:53] One in relation to Ahab, his master, his boss. And the other in relation to Elijah. Let's read what it says. In verse 5, Ahab said to Obadiah, Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys.

Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive. And not lose some of the animals. So they divided the land between them to pass through it. So Ahab went in one direction by himself and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

Now, that would have been the most thankless task you could ever imagine. There would have been a drought and a famine for three years. And so food were scarce. The animals were dying.

They were desperately in need of some kind of pasture in order to survive. The only recourse open to Ahab is to say to Obadiah, Look, you go one way, I'll go another.

Let's look for as much grass as we can find. Or any grass at all will be very welcome. And Obadiah went in one direction and Ahab went in the other direction. It kind of reminds you of an unbelieving

world.

[20 : 56] And the kind of measures they'll take, the desperation that there is, To try and grab what they can to resolve a situation that really can only be resolved by coming back to the Lord.

And that was a situation that Ahab knew what the problem was. Ahab had heard, Elijah had told him, he had made it crystal clear to him, That it was in three years that God would send rain again. And it was because of his own unbelief and his idolatry that God was withholding the rain. Now you would imagine, wouldn't you, that somebody who had heard that message, With every reason to believe it, should have gone looking for Elijah, not to kill him, But in order to say, look, how can I repent?

How can I get this right with the Lord? And instead of that, he's clutching at straws. Can I ask you a question this morning? Are you clutching at straws?

And you know that what you really need to do is to get right with God? It's amazing, isn't it? That once you go down the road of unbelief, Some people become more and more and more determined to continue that unbelief, And they'll refuse to do what they know they need to do.

[22 : 15] To come back to the Lord, and to come back to faith, To come back to fellowship in Jesus Christ. And you know that the kind of life you're living, it would be totally transformed, If you just reinstated God to his rightful place as the King and the Lord in your heart.

And yet, you won't do it. How was Elijah? There's more a fool in Elijah than anything else. Not Elijah, but Ahab. Sorry, I should have said Ahab. Ahab's such a fool, isn't he?

Because he just won't listen to God's word. And God's word was as much a word of love as it is of judgment. God sent Elijah because he loved his people and he wanted the best for them.

God is not willing that any should perish, But he's willing that everyone should come to eternal life.

And yet, they won't listen to God. It's the classic problem in the human race.

We won't listen to God. And we suffer the consequences of it. We suffer the consequences in economy. We suffer the consequences in crime figures.

[23 : 26] And law and order. And in judgment. And in the courts of the land. How many times do we read our newspapers and turn on the news?

And really, the story is all about clutching at straws when we know what the problem is. And if we only could get to the root of the problem and turn our hearts back to a right relationship with God as a nation, Then the kind of problems that are so great and so impossible to resolve, We would resolve them.

I'm not saying there would be no problems, but we would resolve them. Because God would be on our side. And yet, we live in an unbelieving world. Ahab lived.

He was an unbelieving king. And Elijah and Obadiah had to. And Obadiah himself has to suffer the consequences. And he's involved in a fruitless task. I wonder how many, I wonder as he went from place to place desperately looking for grass for the horses.

He must have thought, this is so unnecessary. This is just so pointless. Here I am on my horse desperately going over hills and dales.

[24 : 47] Looking for wee blades of grass here and there. And I know what the answer is. Day after day having to live with the frustration of an unbelieving world.

The groaning that there must have been in his own soul. That's the same groaning as you and I experience, isn't it? As we look at the world around us and we say, oh, if only.

If only we would turn back to the Lord. If only the world around me would listen to the gospel. Well, you keep praying that. And very often our groaning leads to prayer.

Fervent prayer. Real prayer. Urgent prayer. Asking the Lord that he will open the windows of heaven and pour out his spirit upon us. And so that people will turn back to the Lord.

That's what happened here. Later on in this chapter. The people return to the Lord. There are still many problems. There's still another prophet to come. Elisha. But that was the moment in which actually the people began to turn back to the Lord.

[25 : 51] And Obadiah was part of it. So here he was on his own. Going involved in this completely futile, fruitless task.

Of looking for blades of grass for the horses. Groaning within himself. Probably praying at the same time. And yet little did he know that it was only a matter of days.

Before God was going to open the windows of heaven. And he was going to send rain. But he was also going to accept his people back to himself. You keep praying.

Keep praying. That God will have mercy upon us. And upon the gospel. And that people will listen to the gospel. And that you keep witnessing for him. Keep on. Even if you think that.

I mean, I don't know how long Obadiah expected to keep on feeding the prophets. Every day he took his life in his hands. And he was faithfully undertaking this job of keeping the prophets.

[26 : 51] A hundred prophets. And hid them in fifties in a cave. Feeding them with bread and water. It's interesting, isn't it? How differently God works.

If you read the previous chapter. In the same drought. Elijah. He disappeared. He didn't disappear. God took him.

And he placed him in isolation at the brook Kerith. And he fed him. By ravens. The ravens fed him meat and bread in the morning.

And meat and bread in the evening. And he drank from the brook. Right? At the same time. These prophets of the Lord were in caves. And they were being fed.

By Obadiah. See. God was taking care of his people. But in different ways. God was using Elijah.

[27 : 47] According to the work that God gave him to do. Elijah was the bold prophet of God. His job was to go and confront the king. But it was no greater a job.

Than Obadiah. Who was faithfully. Day by day. Unknown to anyone but the prophets. Taking food. Presumably from the palace. And bringing it faithfully to these prophets.

Taking his life in his hands. Feeding them day by day. God works in all kinds of diverse ways.

Different ways. Using different people. At different times.

Making the most. Doing. What they could. That was what Jesus said. Of the woman wasn't it? The poured ointment on him. She did. What she could. And that's all that God expects from us.

To do. What we can. For him. Out of love for him. And out of concern for his kingdom. And out of faith.

[28 : 46] And thankfulness to what he has done. For us. God has placed you. In your circumstances. In your life. In your daily routine. For a reason.

He's. You're not. Someone else. You may. Look at another Christian. And say. Well. I'm not as great as that other Christian. Which may be a bit. Well known. No. That's not the way it works at all. God knows what's in your heart. And he's able to use you. In his way. And just because you're not someone else. Does not mean. That you're any less than that person.

In actual fact. You could be even more faithful than that person. Who is visible. More visible. Than you. Are. And of course. Just in closing. The. The.

The other. Of course. Conversation. That we have in this passage. Is not just between. Obadiah.

And Ahab. But as a second conversation. Is when. Elijah. Meets. Obadiah.

[29 : 39] As he's looking for the grass. And he recognized him. And he fell on his face. And I'm. No doubt. He was absolutely overjoyed. To see Elijah. And he answered him.

Is it. Is it I? Go tell. It is I. Go tell your Lord. Behold. Elijah is here. And he said. How have I sinned. That you would give your servant. Into the hand of Ahab.

To kill me. Now. Obadiah's problem. Was this. You can see how. His faith was kind of. Wobbling. A little bit. Because. Elijah.

Had disappeared. Because God. Had taken him. And when Elijah. Met him. After three years. He said to him. Go and get Ahab. For me. And. Obadiah's fear.

Was. If I tell. If I tell. Ahab. That you are here. And God. Takes you again. Then. There'll be a no show. And. Ahab.

[30 : 32] Will kill me. Because. He'll tell me. That I've lied. To him. This was a time. Of great difficulty. For Obadiah. It was a time.

When his faith. Which was already stretched. Was stretched. Even further. And it's. A reminder. To me. And to you. I hope.

That. Where there is. Real faith. That faith. Will always. Be stretched. Even further. Than it is. At the moment. Faith is. Always.

Stretched. It's. Always. Tested. And that. Test. Always. Involves. Us. Leaving. Our. Comfort. Zone. It's hard. To think. Of Obadiah.

And. And. And what he was doing. As a. Comfort. Zone. I'm sure. It wasn't. Perhaps. I'm being a bit. Unfair. But sometimes. When we get into. A routine. Even in our. Work for the Lord. God.

[31 : 26] Still. Has to. Stretch. That. Faith. Even. Further. But the other thing. Was God. Was doing here. Was that he was bringing. Obadiah. Out. Of his secrecy.

I'm not saying. He was wrong. To be secret. In the past. He needed. To be secret. In the past. But there had. To be a time. When Obadiah. Had to openly. Confess.

His allegiance. To. The Lord. And this. Was that. Moment. In Obadiah's life. In front of everyone. You see.

By going. To Ahab. And by saying. To Ahab. Elijah. Is here. He is. Confessing. To Ahab. Not only. His love. For Elijah. But his love. For the Lord. And I wonder. If there are secret. Believers here. The temptation.

[32 : 22] Is. To stay as you are. Not to make it known. To the world. Around you. But there comes a point. Where you have to. And where God.

As he stretches your faith. He will make that faith. More. And more evident. More. And more obvious. To those around you. Even. If that comes.

At. A cost. The name. Obadiah. Is. The servant. Of the Lord. So when we read. In verse 3. That Obadiah.

Feared the Lord. Greatly. What we read. Here is that. The servant. Of the Lord. Feared. The Lord. Greatly. I come back. To what I said.

At the very outset. Is that. A description. Of your life. Both. In your home. In your soul. In your own heart.

[33 : 16] Your relationship. To God. In your home. In your place of work. In your church. Regardless of. Whatever challenge. Comes away. And whatever.

Whatever difficulty. Comes your way. If we want. If we place God. In the very first. Instance. Or you put God first. And you live. And you work. For him. God.

Will place. That title. On your testimony. That you feared the Lord. Greatly. That would be fantastic. Wouldn't it? It would be wonderful. If we had that testimony. Fear the Lord. Greatly. Let's pray. Our father.

Father. We confess. How poor we have been. At fearing you. Greatly. But we pray. That today. As we've come to. To see. A tremendous example.

[34 : 15] Of what it is. To serve you. In the background. Behind enemy lines. We ask Lord. That you will. Give us encouragement. And give us a determination. To be diligent.

In everything that we do. Knowing. That we don't do it. As men pleasers. But as those who serve you. But as those who serve you. And as those who have placed you. On the throne. Of our hearts. We ask Lord. That you will bless your word to us. And encourage us. Through your word. To serve you. We pray that if there's anyone here today. Who hasn't taken that step of faith. To serve you. We pray that they will do so.

And that they will come. In faith. To accept Jesus. As their own savior. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.