



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

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LOYAL SERVANTS

1 Kings 18:1-21

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In autumn each year we turn our attention to the Old Testament, to prepare for the advent of Jesus the Messiah. As the days get shorter and the darkness sets in, we look ahead to the light of Christ, seeking to remember why God's people needed a savior. The book of 1-2 Kings describes how Israel's leaders disobeyed God's Word and turned their nation away from the Lord. They gave themselves over to idols, testing God's patience and grace. There were some extraordinary moments of resistance and reform, but eventually Israel's apostasy became so great that God gave them over to marauding invaders, and the survivors were carted off into exile. Neither kings nor prophets nor priests could save them. They needed someone greater. They needed the savior we all need: Jesus, the Son of God, who came and dwelt among us, and lay down his life for our sins. In this story, we'll learn more of what it means for us to become loyal servants of Jesus, the high king.

LEARNING FROM A LULL IN THE ACTION (18:1-2)

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. (1 Kings 18:1-2, ESV)

Think of how hot and desolate and miserable it must have been in Israel "in the third year" of the drought. Three years with neither dew nor rain, baking in the sun. "The famine was severe in Samaria," the grand, new, mountaintop capital city, where in recent decades people had grown accustomed to the good life, but now their swimming pools were empty, and their cupboards were bare.

Before the drought, King Ahab had presided over a lengthy period of prosperity and expansion. But it was a lot like the Tower of Babel story,¹ when people united against God to build something for themselves. Ahab blatantly disregarded God's Word throughout his reign. He married the Sidonian princess Jezebel, who imported her nation's idols. Jezebel brought the Sidonian storm god Baal to be Israel's "husband," and Ahab built a temple for Baal in the capital city of Samaria. They also welcomed the Sidonian mother goddess Asherah as a mistress for Yahweh, the God of Israel. In all of this we are told (16:33), "Ahab did more to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

¹ Genesis 9:1-11.

Consequently God sent his ambassador Elijah with a message for Ahab: "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (17:1). Since Ahab had led Israel into worshipping Baal, the so-called god of fertility and ruler over the clouds, rain and dew, the Lord Yahweh was turning off the water main until further notice. It would be a vivid demonstration of the impotence of Baal, the god fertility and life, and the supremacy of Yahweh, Israel's true husband.

Over the next three years, Baal couldn't deliver. The rivers went dry and the land turned to dust. Meanwhile, the Lord continued to minister to and through his ambassador, Elijah. After speaking God's Word to Ahab, Elijah then obeyed God's Word, leaving behind the luxuries of Samaria and going out into the wilderness to depend upon the Lord's provision. Elijah went on to the heart of Baal's territory, in Sidon, where he helped the widow of Zarephath and her son find life and faith in the living God. In all this, Elijah modeled for us the kind of life God is calling us all to live as his ambassadors. As James writes, Elijah was a man just like us.² He believed and he prayed, and God worked miraculously through him. So also should we believe and pray and expect God to do even greater things, as Jesus promised his disciples.

We read in 1 Kings 18:1 that after three years, God told Elijah: "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." So, Elijah presumably left Sidon and the company of the widow whose household was prospering by faith in the Lord. He journeyed south into Samaria in order to confront King Ahab and his impotent idol Baal. And what will soon take place is one of the most exciting stories in the Bible, a spectacular showdown atop Mt. Carmel between Yahweh and Baal, and their respective prophets. Baal's entourage of 450 prophets will cut themselves and pour out their own blood, calling out to Baal for hours to rain down fire and consume their sacrifice. But Baal will prove to be just as impotent in delivering fire as he had been in delivering rain. Then Elijah will pray once again, and the Lord will answer him once again, first with fire, and then with rain. And the people of Israel will see that it is the Lord, and not Baal, who supplies all their needs.

That's where this story is heading, but first there's a lull in the action as Elijah speaks with a minor character named Obadiah. Churches don't often do sermon series on 1 Kings, but when they do, they frequently skip from miracle to miracle, in this case moving straight from the resurrection in Zarephath (17:17-24) to the victory at Mt Carmel (18:20ff). In comparison with these miracles, Elijah's meeting with Obadiah feels mundane. That's why people often skip this section. Yet the Christian life is lived in the mundane. The path you choose in those rare, life-changing decisions is based on who you are and what you do in the mundane. And here is a passage that is particularly relevant to life in the mundane, because this passage is about the challenge of blessing and supporting one another from contrasting positions of influence, as God often employs both "insiders" and "outsiders" in the service of the kingdom.

² James 5:17.

Elijah was a man just like us, and we are to be people just like Elijah, proclaiming and praying, speaking to men and women about God, and speaking to God about men and women. All of us are called to be God's ambassadors. However, we are one body with many members, and the members do not all have the same function.³ Within our shared calling as God's ambassadors we're assigned to different posts, playing different roles, engaging the world in different ways, often as either "insiders" or "outsiders." Insiders are those people whom God positions with authority *inside* some administration or institution, to serve as his ambassadors from within. Outsiders are those ambassadors whom God positions *outside* an administration or institution, often to challenge and to warn. We have both in the church, but sometimes they don't like or trust one another because of their contrasting, strategic positions.

THE INSIDER'S DILEMMA: SERVING TWO MASTERS (18:3-6)

Clearly, Elijah was an outsider, commissioned by God to challenge and warn King Ahab. Obadiah, on the other hand, was an insider:

[3] And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, [4] 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.) [5] And 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." [6] So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself. (1 Kings 18:3-6, ESV)

Obadiah was a true insider, given his strategic position "over the household," as King Ahab's chief of staff. Obadiah was the king's *servant*. Yet his name was Obadiah, which means "Servant of Yah(weh)," which highlights for us the inherent tension of being an insider. Both the insider and the outsider roles can be difficult, but one of the good things about being an outsider is that one doesn't have to serve two masters. Insiders, however, must do so, and sometimes must choose between them, just as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.⁴ This was certainly true in Obadiah's case, because Ahab had hardened his heart against the Lord.

So who was Obadiah's greater master, Ahab or the Lord? Where did his true loyalties fall? We're told in v 3, "Obadiah feared the Lord (Yahweh) greatly," which is to say that Obadiah was a real believer, just like Elijah. When forced to make a choice, Obadiah was the loyal servant of the Lord. So when Jezebel "cut off" the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took one hundred of them, divided them into two groups, hid them in two caves, and supplied them with bread and water. As a loyal servant of the Lord, Obadiah acted bravely to preserve Yahweh's people.

³ Romans 12:4.

⁴ Matthew 6:24.

In our congregation there are a number of insiders—loyal servants of the Lord who also play key roles in an institution. It's worth pointing out that one doesn't have to be White House Chief of Staff in order to have a strategic insider position. Almost everyone with a job outside the home is something of an insider where they work. For those whom God calls to strategic insider positions, know that you have the full support and encouragement of our congregation. We pray that God will bless you and keep you in what may prove to be very challenging roles.

There are two challenges in particular that are highlighted in Obadiah's meeting with Elijah. The first challenge is when an insider must choose to disobey his or her supervisor in order to do the right thing. If you are placed somewhere as a strategic insider, you must be prepared for the day when being a loyal servant of the Lord may require defiance of your proximate, institutional master. If that day comes, then you'll have to believe, just as Esther did centuries later, that God made you an insider "for such a time as this." And you'll have to take the risk and do the right thing, just as Obadiah did when he rescued the prophets of the Lord.

Ahab apparently remained unaware of Obadiah's secret action, because he trusted Obadiah enough to send him out on his own in search of food and water for the livestock. Ahab went one direction, and Obadiah went the other. If only the king had been as motivated to save the prophets of the Lord as he was to save the livestock! Listen again to 18:5, in this more word-for-word translation of the Hebrew. Ahab says: "Come, let us cross through the land, to all the springs of water and to all the wadis. Perhaps we will find some green grass, that we may keep horse and mule alive, and will not have to *cut off* any of the animals."⁵ Ahab didn't want to *cut off* the animals (18:5), but was apparently unconcerned that Jezebel had *cut off* the prophets (18:4). That's why God had strategically placed Obadiah inside Ahab's administration.

This passage should come as an encouragement to every loyal servant of the Lord who has had to disobey a supervisor in order to do the right thing. Not only did God orchestrate Obadiah's strategic position as an insider, but he also kept Ahab in the dark about Obadiah's secret rescue operations. *If God is powerful enough to place you, then he's powerful enough to protect you.* When your loyalties are tested, think again of Esther, and also of Daniel, and his three friends (Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego), and of the patriarch Joseph in Pharaoh's court. Let these many stories of God's protection for his loyal servants encourage you also to take the risk and do the right thing.

And don't forget Obadiah's story as well. He and Ahab split up in order to preserve the livestock with food and water (18:6). Ahab had no idea that Obadiah had also split up the prophets of the Lord in order to preserve them with food and water (18:4). It's one more reminder of how God protects his loyal servants.

⁵ Everett Fox, *The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings*. The Schocken Bible: Volume II. Schocken, 2014.

THE INSIDER AND THE OUTSIDER (18:7-14)

So Obadiah set off in search of a solution for the king's livestock, and along the way, v 7, he found one, for "behold, Elijah met him." It's probably their first meeting since Elijah announced the drought to King Ahab three years prior. The story doesn't tell us what they were thinking about one another, so we can't know for sure. But we can speculate about what might have been going through their heads.

For Elijah's part, he had spoken God's Word to King Ahab, and then he hadn't stuck around to watch. Not that he had any choice in the matter. Elijah said to Ahab, "thus sayeth the Lord," and then the Lord said to Elijah, "Let's go into the Jordanian wilderness!" From there, God took Elijah to Sidon, to live at the home of the widow. So God directed Elijah's steps, and Elijah served the Lord as an outsider. To us as the readers, and apparently to Elijah as well, it seemed like the Lord had "cut off" everyone else in Israel. Elijah may have felt like he was the only true believer, as everyone else in Israel had a divided heart, serving two masters, unable to live without the creature comforts of a sinful city. Elijah may well have believed that Obadiah was a compromiser, a lap dog of Ahab, and now an enemy—of the Lord and of Elijah.

Obadiah, on the other hand, had been serving the Lord as an insider. As the drought unfolded, Obadiah didn't run. He remained within the administration, flying under radar, working for good, and sometimes risking his life to undo the king's tyranny. For his part, Obadiah may have resented Elijah for delivering God's word of condemnation and then running away. He may have thought, why didn't Elijah stick around and help protect the remaining prophets? He also may have thought that Elijah had it easy as an outsider, not having to worry about pleasing the King while also pleasing the Lord. And as the drought grew worse, and conditions deteriorated, and people began to suffer, Obadiah may have blamed Elijah for all the consequences, and begun to see Elijah as his enemy.

See how this works? If you've lived in Washington for very long, you already know how it works, because it's happening all the time. When my wife and I moved to Washington, the evangelical Christian leader Robert Seiple, head of World Vision, took a job in the Clinton Administration as the first Ambassador for International Religious Freedom. In hindsight it's apparent that God placed Seiple in a strategic, insider position, yet at the time there were a number of prominent Christian voices on the outside that condemned him for "selling out." That's how it happens so often—strategically placed Christians on the inside and the outside, assuming the worst about one another, and condemning one another for it.

We must stop this. In Romans 13, Paul writes about the challenge of obeying the Lord and also submitting to the government. Then, in the next chapter, he writes: "Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer."⁶ Give one another the benefit of the doubt. Believe that he who began a good work in them will be faithful to complete it, just as he will in you as well.

⁶ Romans 14:13.

We don't know what Elijah and Obadiah were thinking about one another when they met on the road to Samaria. It seems like Obadiah tried to be nice when he recognized Elijah and bowed before him, asking, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" (18:7).

Elijah's response, on the other hand, is somewhat ambiguous. He says:

"It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, *Elijah is here.*'" (18:8)

But since Elijah's name means "My God is Yah(weh)," this verse could also be translated:

"It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, *my God is Yah(weh),*'" (18:8)

It's not clear whether Elijah is asking Obadiah simply to report that the prophet has returned, or whether he wants Obadiah to confront Ahab and declare his primary loyalty to the Lord. Either way, Elijah is putting Obadiah in a tricky situation, because even if he is only asking Obadiah to serve as his messenger, it's still risky. If you think of Obadiah as a kind of spy, what Elijah is doing here is creating a situation that may well blow Obadiah's cover. And doesn't this capture the way outsiders so often feel about insiders? "Come on, Obadiah. Don't be such a coward. I've told Ahab that I serve the Lord. Why can't you tell him too?"

Obadiah responds in alarm: "How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab to *kill me*?" (18:9). He goes on to describe how Ahab has been searching for Elijah everywhere, and how Elijah has a track record of disappearing when Ahab comes looking. So this time, Obadiah says, "when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will *kill me*, although I your servant have feared the Lord since my youth" (18:12). Don't you know that I rescued one hundred of the Lord's prophets? (18:13) And now you say, "Go tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here,' (or 'Behold, my God is Yahweh') and he will *kill me*" (18:14).

Three times in his short speech, Obadiah envisions making the ambiguous declaration to Ahab, "Elijah is here" / "my God is Yah(weh)," and each time he goes on to say that Ahab will kill him. Obadiah is afraid, and his fears are legitimate. Ahab has already demonstrated time and again that he is a tyrant. If he can't find Elijah, it's very likely that he will shoot the messenger.

Obadiah the insider is right in helping his outsider brother understand his perspective. It's mundane and often tedious work, talking it out with others in the body who may not understand you because of your strategic placement. Nevertheless, this sort of vulnerability is what makes for healthy, thriving relationships. We must help one another in this way. Otherwise, the body will lose its diversity. Instead of being one body and many parts, we will become one part, and the body will wither.

KNOWING WHEN TO QUIT (18:15-16)

I mentioned earlier that this passage highlights two of the challenges of being an insider. The first is having to disobey one's supervisor in order to do the right thing. The second is knowing when to quit.

It's an exhilarating feeling when God places you in a strategic position as an insider. From the institutional perspective, you've been given an important job to do. The Lord has also entrusted you with responsibility as his loyal servant. And if you're faithful in your post, then you will have the great joy of seeing the fruit of your labors. Yet you must always remember that you're not the savior. God is. And there may well come a time when you need to relinquish your strategic position, step away, and trust that the sovereign Lord who placed you there is fully able to save the world without you.

I'm not certain about what's going on in vv 15-16, but I think it's just such a moment, as Elijah reassures Obadiah that the Lord is powerful and fully able to take it from here. Elijah says to Obadiah, "As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to Ahab today" (18:15).⁷ Elijah's oath is very similar to the one he declared in the prior chapter (17:1) when he foretold the drought. On both occasions Elijah said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand." This time, Elijah was swearing an oath to his brother Obadiah that he would not disappear. At the same time, he was also reminding Obadiah of the greater truth behind this entire chapter in Israel's history: Obadiah wasn't the savior. Nor was Elijah. Despite all the amazing things that he did, not even Elijah could save God's people. Only Jesus could do that.

Jesus came to put an end, once and for all, to the tension everyone feel in serving two masters. Jesus came as the rightful king of Israel, yet the people rejected him as an outsider. Eventually the regime in power arrested Jesus and put him to death. But death could not hold him! Jesus rose again, victorious over his enemies and over death itself. He ascended into heaven, where he was enthroned as king, and now he reigns at the right hand of the Father. He is putting all things in subjection to himself. He is renewing all things and restoring whatever is broken in our world. Someday every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord. On that day, there will be no more insiders or outsiders, no more need to choose between masters, because we will all be loyal servants of the just and righteous king Jesus.

When times are hard, when the brokenness of politics, or city life, or relationships, or your own sin gets you down. remember that King Jesus is putting everything in subjection to himself and making all things new. His kingdom shall reign from shore to shore, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against his church.

⁷ In the Hebrew text of 18:15, "the Lord of hosts" is *Yahweh Sabaoth*. In Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," one of the verses says, "Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same, and he shall win the battle." Lord Sabaoth means the Lord of hosts, i.e. the Lord who rules the heavenly armies.

Obadiah took Elijah at his word, and he went and fetched Ahab (18:16). That's the last we ever hear of Obadiah in 1-2 Kings. We don't know what happened to him. All we know is that Obadiah and Elijah found a way to trust one another and work together in the service of the Lord and his kingdom.

Jesus calls us all to be his ambassadors, just as he once called the disciples to join him. In Matthew 9:9ff, Jesus called Matthew the tax collector to be his disciple. Matthew was definitely an insider, part of the bureaucracy that was the Roman occupation of 1st C Palestine. His coming on board the team would stretched all the other disciples, especially Simon the Zealot, who probably had a history of violence against insiders connected with the empire. But in gathering around Jesus, the disciples came to trust one another and eventually became friends. That's what happens when Jesus calls us into fellowship with him and with one another.

Jesus has called you to follow him as well, and he will place you wherever he pleases, according to his good purposes and the way God made you. He may place you in a strategic position as an insider. He may place you as an outsider, to critique and to warn. In any case, he calls us all together into his family, and no matter what our posts, his love will overcome our differences and bind us together as friends.