



God's servants are found in some of the most surprising places. We've been looking at the life of Elijah. He served in a very dark time in the history of God's people. King Ahab and his wife Jezebel were in charge. They were worshippers of a god named Baal. This was a violent and degraded religion with everything from temple prostitutes to child sacrifice. The fiery prophet Elijah appeared out of nowhere and confronted the King on behalf of God. He announced there'd be no rain or dew in the land except by his word.

Then Elijah just disappeared. He vanished into thin air and took the rain with him. Just like that, the weather report in Israel was the same every day—clear skies, lots of sunshine, not a cloud in sight, stifling heat. Meanwhile, God sent Elijah far away into the mountains east of the Jordan River. For a while he drank from a trickling brook and was fed by all things ravens. Then the brook dried up and God sent him to a town called Zarephath to be provided for by a poor widow. This was outside of Israel in the heartland of Baal worship where Jezebel was from. What a strange place for God to send his prophet!

All this time Ahab was scouring the nation looking for Elijah. I'm sure the first few months weren't so bad. You could still find a little water if you knew where to look. But as the days passed the reports came in—fields turning brown, soil becoming cracked and hard, no crops, emaciated donkeys and cows. Slowly the storehouses emptied and people began to starve. The King had to do something! He stopped at nothing to find Elijah. He even sent soldiers on a manhunt to the surrounding nations. He never thought to look in Zarephath.

Then, finally, the word of the Lord came again to Elijah.

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab (1 Kings 18:1–2a).

I wonder how Elijah felt about that. On the one hand, he understood the danger, but I think he was glad to get on with it. Elijah was a man of action. During those three years in hiding, he must have wondered why he was twiddling his thumbs at a widow's house while wickedness spread among God's people. He must have prayed, "God, do something!" But to his credit he waited until God gave him a green light to go back.

But it wasn't Ahab he met first. As he traveled from Zarephath to Samaria he met a man named Obadiah. In almost every way you can think of he was different from Elijah, but Obadiah was also a servant of God. And like Elijah he served God in a very surprising place.

Obadiah Was a Good Man in a Hard Place

We're introduced to Obadiah in verses 2b–6.

Now the famine was severe in Samaria, and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, his palace administrator. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord. While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.) Ahab had said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe we can find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so we will not have to kill any of our animals." So they divided the land they were to cover, Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another.

Obadiah is a very intriguing character. We learn several things about him here. First, he was Ahab's chief of staff, his right hand man, the guy who kept things running smoothly. Here at CPC we have a guy named Charlie Royce who's our palace administrator. He does a tremendous job. We'd all be lost around here without him. Obadiah was that guy for Ahab. He must have had considerable talent because he had a ton of responsibility. He oversaw the servants, the waiters, and the King's appointments. No doubt Ahab trusted Obadiah. He knew if you get the wrong person in that job you're in big trouble. Obadiah was like Mr. Carson on *Downton Abbey*. He was the guy behind the scenes who made it all happen.

Another thing we learn about Obadiah is he was a devout believer in the Lord. Later in the story he says he's worshipped the Lord since his youth. You have to wonder how such a godly man could end up in charge of the palace for a wicked couple like Ahab and Jezebel. And not just how he could end up there, but how he could continue being a part of what was going on there? In fact, there are some reliable commentators who see Obadiah as an example of spiritual compromise and a watered down faith. If he was a real man of God like Elijah, he wouldn't put up

with Ahab and Jezebel. But I don't agree. God often places his servants in the darkest of places.

» Joseph was placed at the right hand of Pharaoh, King of Egypt; not an easy place to be for a believer, but God used him to supply food for the family of God.

» Esther was placed in the court of King Ahasuerus, King of Persia; but through her God's people would be delivered from a holocaust.

» Daniel was placed in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Imagine how hard that was, but God used Daniel to introduce that king to the Living God.

» In the New Testament we meet a woman named Joanna, who was King Herod's household manager (Luke 8:3). Joanna was one of the women who went to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. Imagine working in Herod's palace, they very place John the Baptist was beheaded!

» In his letter to the Philippians, Paul greets those who are of Caesar's household (Phil. 4:22). There were believers in the highest levels of the Roman Empire, a very dark place indeed. How did they get into these positions? They were gifted, and trustworthy, and somehow, in the midst of it, they were godly.

As you can see, Obadiah wasn't the first devout believer God put in a dark place. You see, different believers have different callings. Elijah was called to overtly confront evil from the outside while Obadiah was called to subversively work to overcome it from within. I'd guess that most of you have callings more like Obadiah than Elijah. Maybe you're working in a place where things go on you're not comfortable with.

» Those who teach in public school wonder, "How can I support a school where I can't even mention God? How can I teach this curriculum that contradicts my own convictions?"

» A lawyer asks, "How can I in good conscience uphold this law when I think it's wrong?"

» A doctor may wonder, "How can I serve in this hospital when there are procedures performed here I know God detests?"

» A banker may ask, "How can I be part of an institution that invests in companies that do things I know are wrong?"

» A politician may wonder, "How can I be a part of this administration when compromises are made that I abhor?"

This list goes on and on, and these are good questions. You may even wonder, "As a Christ follower, should I even be there? Maybe I should go to seminary and become a pastor or a missionary. Maybe I should teach in a Christian school. Maybe I should start a Christian company." It's not easy to live in Obadiah's shoes, but this is the real world in which we live. Obadiah's calling placed him in a position of tension. He had to both obey Ahab and obey the Lord. At times he must have wondered if he was where he

was supposed to be. How do we manage this tension? There are no easy answers. As long as we live in this world, we'll have to participate, at least indirectly, in evil. But there's a difference between direct and indirect participation in evil. You should avoid the former, but you can't avoid the latter. You might work for a software company that sells a product that can be used in immoral ways; you can't really help that. We live in a fallen world with fallen people.

Obadiah's career as Ahab's chief of staff is of huge significance to every follower of Christ who struggles with these questions. He shows us God places his servants in surprising places, dark places, to make a difference for him. Wherever you are, you're not there by accident. God can use you to make a difference. You do have to be wise about it. I'd even say you have to be a little sneaky. It's like you're working undercover for God. Maybe this is what Jesus was talking about when said to be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. And Obadiah did make a difference.

This is the last thing we learn about him. He made a difference in a dark place. When he was given a chance to act, he was willing to risk his neck for the Lord. Though the drought was designed to soften the hearts of Ahab and Jezebel, it had the reverse effect. Jezebel began killing the Lord's prophets. So Obadiah began to hide them from her and fed them with food and water at a time when it was quite scarce. Obadiah wasn't just a believer by profession. He walked his talk. He's willing to step out and take a risk. Jezebel is killing God's prophets, and her husband's chief of staff is hiding them in caves! Obadiah was willing to put his neck on the line so God's Word through these prophets could stay alive in Israel. If Jezebel found out what he was doing, he'd be dead meat.

Obadiah reminds me of Corrie ten Boom. Many of you know her story. She was an unmarried Christian women who lived with her sister and father. In 1924 she became the first licensed female watchmaker in the Netherlands. In 1942 a well-dressed Jewish woman came to her home with a suitcase in hand and told them German authorities had visited her. She was afraid to go back. The ten Boom's believed God was calling them to help. They invited her to stay with them. The family began hiding Jewish refugees in their home and saved many lives. Eventually, Corrie and her family were arrested and placed in a concentration camp. Her father and sister died there, but Corrie was finally released after ten months. She later found out her release was the result of a clerical error. She said, "God doesn't have problems—only plans."

I think Obadiah understood that. God had a plan when he placed him in that dark place. His calling to work undercover for God within an evil regime allowed him to make a difference. If he was a prophet like Elijah he couldn't have done that. And when push came to shove he was willing to take a great risk; a risk that

took faith and courage. He was a good man in a hard place who did the right thing when it mattered most. God has placed us where we are for a purpose. Are we willing to trust him and take a risk when the opportunity presents itself?

So Ahab sends Obadiah on a mission to find grass for his animals. I guess he'd been praying to Baal long enough; now he takes matters into his own hands. Obadiah goes one way and Ahab goes another. It's revealing that while people are starving to death, and while the prophets of God are being murdered, Ahab is worried about his horses and mules! That's probably because horses were at the heart of his national defense. But that's the kind of man he was—more concerned with horses than people.

Elijah Needed Obadiah, but Misunderstood Him

While Obadiah was searching for grass, he runs into none other than the prophet Elijah. How do you think these two would get along? Let's pick up the story and see what happens in verses 7–15.

As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, "Is it really you, my lord Elijah?"

"Yes," he replied. "Go tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'"

"What have I done wrong," asked Obadiah, "that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? As surely as the Lord your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. But now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' I don't know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshiped the Lord since my youth. Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the Lord? I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. And now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' He will kill me!"

Elijah said, "As the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today."

There's a lot of tension in this meeting. You get the feeling Elijah isn't sure what to do with this guy. Elijah says to go tell **your** master, "Elijah is here." It seems Elijah wants to pigeonhole Obadiah as Ahab's servant, but Obadiah sees himself differently. He bows down to Elijah and he calls himself Elijah's servant in verse 9. He also makes it clear that he worships the Lord God of Israel, just as Elijah does.

Elijah needs Obadiah to go back and arrange the meeting with Ahab. It's clear Obadiah fears going back to Ahab with news he's

found Elijah. This could cost him his life. Ahab had an APB out on Elijah for three years. Obadiah's thinking, "And now you want me to tell Ahab I found you, and you want to see him? You have a habit of disappearing, Elijah. Where have you been the last three years? What if the Spirit of God just wisps you away again and I'm left with my pants down? And by the way, haven't you heard how I've worshipped the Lord since my youth and have been hiding the Lord's prophets from Jezebel? Why would you want to get me killed? I love the Lord just like you do!"

Elijah reassures him: "As the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today." The brevity of his words are in stark contrast to Obadiah's rather lengthy speech, and it hints at the difference between these two men. Obadiah is a God-fearing man who lives in the complexities of the real world. Some have criticized him for being afraid, but he's already shown he's willing to die for what he believes; he just doesn't want to die for no reason at all. Elijah, on the other hand, is the fiercely independent servant of God who won't back down for anyone, and he can't understand why anyone would.

It's helpful to think of how Elijah felt. Imagine yourself in his shoes. God has called you to confront evil. You feel all alone in this and now here's a guy who is supposed to be your ally, and you find out he's working for the king who's out to destroy you. If you're Elijah you want to say to Obadiah, "What are you doing working in that palace? How can you possibly serve a king who's done so much evil?"

Spurgeon wrote, "I suspect Elijah didn't think very much of Obadiah. He doesn't treat him with any great consideration, but addresses him more sharply than one would expect from a fellow-believer. Elijah was the 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 perform his duty in a less open manner. His faith in the Lord swayed his life, but didn't drive him out of the court."

That makes good sense to me. I wonder if sometimes our desire to judge other believers stems not from spiritual insight but from differences in personality and callings. God gave these men different temperaments and different callings, yet they're on the same side.

Look at it this way: In the Old Testament the Lord uses prophets, priests and politicians (kings). Prophets are called by God to speak the hard truth. They condemn sin and call people to righteousness. Priests are called to comfort hurting people and intercede for them before God. Politicians are called to lead and negotiate and find ways to apply God's truth in the real world. Consider how these three callings might approach a difficult moral issue like abortion. The prophet will denounce it. The priest will minister to those hurt by it. And the politician will try to figure out how to bring God's truth to bear in the real world. My experience

is prophets rarely appreciate priests, and priests don't appreciate prophets, and neither appreciates politicians! Prophets often look at priests as soft and weak, while priests see prophets as harsh and uncaring. They both see politicians as compromised. But all three are called by the Lord and have important jobs to do.

It would be simplistic to say, "Can't we all just get along?" But if we can't always work together, at least we can hold our convictions in love, understanding not everyone is called to do what we're called to do. Paul says in Romans 14:4, *"Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval."*

Elijah should have been comforted to know there were others who had not caved into Baal worship! Later in chapter 19 he'll complain to the Lord he's the only one left who worships the Lord, but that's not true. He forgot about Obadiah and those 100 prophets he had saved. Elijah needed Obadiah whether he knew it or not. It was Obadiah who paved the way for the prophet to meet the king again.

And so it was that Obadiah took another risky step of faith and returned to Ahab. Look at verse 16.

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

We'll see what happens next time when the two get together, but for now let's just stop there.

God's servants are found in some of the most surprising places. When I say that I can't help but think of Jesus Christ. The Bible says the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Like Obadiah, he didn't confront sin from the outside; he became one of us and worked from within. Like Obadiah, he was misunderstood. Like Obadiah, he rescued many. He didn't just put his life on the line; he gave up his life; he even bore the burden of our sin through his own death.

If you're trying to serve God in a dark place and juggle your commitment to God and your obligation to your superiors, Jesus said some things to help you. First, he said, *"No one can serve two*

masters" (Matthew 6:24). So you have to decide up front, "I have only one Master. I can't have two. Jesus is my Lord. He calls the shots. I won't disobey a direct charge from him. If there are consequences, so be it."

But he also said a second thing. He said, *"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God"* (Matthew 22:21). Having decided we have only one Master, there's another responsibility we have—to Caesar. We have responsibilities to the job we work at, and we have responsibilities to the laws of our land. As God's servant, not juggling two masters, we still need to live out our life making hard decisions about what's right and wrong.

When I was in seminary, I worked as a waiter. It wasn't the greatest job in the world, but it helped support my wife and daughter. There were a lot of things that went on in the restaurant I worked in that were wrong and hard to be around. I served alcohol to those who drank too much. I served food to those who ate too much. I helped create a romantic atmosphere for couples that had no business being together. But I pretty much kept my mouth shut and did my job. I suppose there are some followers of Christ who'd never work at a place like that, and would judge someone like me who did. But I needed the job and tried to make a difference. But one day my boss came to me and told me to stop claiming all my tips as income because if my reported tips were always much more than the others the IRS would catch on that they were lying. I was putting them in jeopardy of being busted. I told him I couldn't lie, and if I had to lie to keep my job, he'd have to find another waiter. He didn't like that, but he knew I was a hard worker and he never brought it up again.

God's servants are found in some of the most surprising places. If that's you, don't forget you have only one master, and he's placed you where you are for a purpose. Others may not understand, but he does. He's been there. If that's not you, try to refrain from judging your brother or sister. Give them the benefit of the doubt. You may not know this, but you need them as much as they need you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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