



The Message of Elijah

(6) An Assignment for Obadiah

1 Kings 18:1-16

Text verses 7-16

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I want to begin this sermon with a footnote. You really can't use footnotes in sermons the way you would use them in something that is written to be read, but it is important to acknowledge your sources to some extent. Sometimes I do that through a quote. In this case I want to do it by mentioning a book that I am finding to be exceptionally useful in this series about Elijah so that a higher percentage of the main ideas are coming from that book. The book is called "My God is Yahweh, by M.B Van't Veer. It is an old book, no longer in print. I had to buy it on the used book market through Amazon so that the postage cost as much as the book, but it was worth every penny. It is far better than anything else on these chapters and so more ideas in these sermons come from one book than is usual for my sermons. I'm reading more than just this book, but nothing else comes close to Van't Veers book when it comes to insight into the meaning of this section of Scripture. So that's my footnote.

One of the things that is striking about the message of the Bible is how completely contrary it is to the spirit of our age. The spirit of our age puts human beings at the center. The Bible puts God at the center. One of the great themes of the Bible is that God is God and we are not God. At one level that is rather obvious. But at a deeper level, becoming a Christian means acknowledging that fact about the nature of things and growing as a Christian involves conforming our thoughts and our attitudes and our priorities and our behaviour to that reality. God is God and we are not God. What really matters is God and his glory and for us

life and blessing consist of increasingly learning and conforming to that fact.

This is a thought that controls all of Scripture and it is a fundamental principle of biblical interpretation. It is a thought that comes through loud and clear in the verses that we are going to consider this morning. These verses tell the story of Elijah meeting Obadiah and telling him to tell King Ahab that he was back in the land.

Everything about this meeting emphasizes the greatness and the sovereignty of God. Elijah was here because the word of the Lord had come to him and told him to show himself to Ahab. Remember verse 1 of this chapter, “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.’” The word of the LORD is God speaking. And the word of the LORD is directing the events. The word of the LORD is in complete control of the action in this story.

And we see this power and authority in Elijah’s address to Obadiah. Elijah is the prophet of the LORD. He is the bearer of the word of the LORD. And Obadiah is a servant of the LORD, but also a servant of King Ahab. He is on Ahab’s time. He is on a mission for Ahab. But Elijah, as God’s prophet, does not ask Obadiah if he thinks it might be ok with Ahab if he turns aside from Ahab’s mission to go and tell Ahab that Elijah has appeared. Elijah speaks with the authority of the word of the LORD. “Go, tell your lord, ‘Behold, Elijah is here’”. Obadiah is commanded by the prophet of God and that command overrules every other authority in Obadiah’s life. When God speaks, he speaks as the highest authority – his word trumps every other authority. There is no higher authority on earth than the word of the LORD.

This is how the word of the LORD addresses us. The word of the LORD for us is preserved in the Bible and the Bible addresses us as the highest authority in heaven and on earth because it is the word of God. When we read or hear the Bible we are not being given suggestions about how to improve our lives. We are not being given ideas to knock around and decide whether we find them convincing or compelling. We are being addressed by God himself, by the highest authority there is, and we are required to accept whatever the Bible teaches as God’s truth and to

obey everything that God in his word tells us to do. It is that authority that is being conveyed in the command that Elijah gives to Ahab's servant. There is no hesitation to tell Ahab's servant what to do and the message is that the God who speaks far exceeds Ahab in greatness and authority.

It is significant that Elijah, as the prophet of the LORD, sends **Obadiah** to summon King Ahab. There were other options. Elijah could have just appeared to Ahab like he did when he announced the famine. He could have appeared to some other servant of Ahab to go and tell the king that Elijah was back in the land. But he did neither of those things. He sends Obadiah who was not only a servant of the king, he was also a servant of the LORD. In verse 3 we are told that "Obadiah feared the LORD greatly." The messenger who was dispatched to tell Ahab that Elijah was back in the land and waiting for Ahab to come to him was one of the few faithful followers of the LORD. So we have Elijah as the prophet of the LORD. And we have Ahab as the king of Israel who was defying the LORD. And we have Obadiah one of a faithful remnant sent with a message from God to Ahab. The message that Elijah as God's prophet had something to say to Ahab was conveyed by a faithful follower of Yahweh.

What is the significance of this? It is interesting that when Elijah himself appeared to Ahab to announce the famine it was a word of judgment and that judgment had effected the faithful followers of the LORD as well as Ahab and all those who had forsaken the LORD. The story makes it clear that both those who had forsaken the LORD and the much smaller number who were faithful to God suffered in the famine that was the result of the drought. Obadiah was one who had remained faithful to the LORD even through the drought and the famine. He had hidden 100 prophets from Jezebel's wrath, and he had brought them food and drink in their hiding places. In his case the discipline of the LORD had resulted in faithfulness and spiritual growth.

We do not know exactly why God chose to speak directly through Elijah when he announced the drought and that he chose to summon Ahab through Obadiah at this point, but one thing that Obadiah's mission here does is foreshadow the church's mission in the world to bring the

good news of salvation to sinners who may or may not welcome that good news. While we do not know exactly why God chose to summon Ahab through Obadiah, it is a foreshadowing of God's plan to send the church into the world with the message of salvation through repentance and faith – a message that is often dangerous to bring because it includes a call to submit to God that is highly offensive to people who do not acknowledge God's authority.

The word of the Lord is a summons to life and blessing, but it is also a word that confronts. Obadiah was being told to approach Ahab and tell him that Elijah was alive and well and demanding to speak to the king. Given the relationship between Ahab and Elijah there is no question that the word of the LORD would be a confronting word. Obadiah was being told to summon Ahab hear the word of the LORD which would assert the "Godness" of God and the "not-Godness" of Ahab. And this foreshadows the mission of the Church to confront the world with the demands of the word of God which at the same time is the good news of the gospel. There is life and blessing in the gospel, but it is on the far side of faith and repentance. The gospel requires submission to Jesus as Lord and so it is a dangerous message to bring to a world which is defying the authority of God as the history of persecution shows.

Here we see how demanding God is. Following the LORD is truly the way of life and blessing, but the LORD does not hesitate to send his people into harm's way from a human perspective. God promises to protect his people from harm, but that promise does not mean that they will not suffer and even die. Protecting his people from harm must be understood in the light of eternity. It certainly does not mean that God does not send his people into situations that are extremely dangerous from a this-worldly perspective. To be assigned to bring the word of the LORD to people, many of whom will find it to be supremely offensive, is a dangerous mission from a this-worldly perspective.

At the moment it is not that dangerous for us compared to many Christians in the world. For us the danger is more being despised and hated because we bring the word of the LORD rather than suffering physical harm. But the point is that God's great priority for us is not our comfort or our physical wellbeing. His mission for us will result in us

being hated by the world and perhaps even suffering and death. What is far more important than our comfort and physical wellbeing is getting God's message to the people of the world that he is God and that all people are accountable to him and required to submit to his authority.

This theme continues in the story that is before us this morning. Obadiah protests that Elijah is sending him to his death. He tells Elijah that Ahab has been searching everywhere for Elijah. Ahab has required people to swear an oath that they were telling the truth if they said that they had not seen Elijah. Obadiah imagines telling Ahab that he has found Elijah and then Elijah disappearing again. Ahab would not be amused. Ahab was very touchy where Elijah was concerned. Ahab was obsessed with finding Elijah. And Obadiah is sure that if he tells Ahab that he has seen Elijah and Elijah is carried away by the Spirit of the LORD, Ahab will have Obadiah's head. Ancient kings like Ahab were very dangerous to people who disappointed them. So Obadiah is afraid to carry out the mission that Elijah had given to him.

What are we to think of Obadiah's fear? In one sense it is understandable. But it was inconsistent with the attitude that God requires from his people. It was God who was sending Obadiah on this mission through Elijah. And when God gives his people a task to perform, he expects them to trust that as long as they are doing his will, they are as safe as it is possible to be. That safety does not mean that they will not have to suffer or even die. It means that it is far safer to be within the will of God and lose your life than it is to be alive and outside of the will of God. The attitude that God was looking for from Obadiah was trust in the LORD no matter what might happen to him.

We see this in Jesus' instruction to his disciples recorded in Matthew 10. Jesus was sending his disciples out on a preaching mission. They were to preach the kingdom of God. That means among other things they were to preach the Godness of God – the authority of God – the requirements of God as well as the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus says to them in Matthew 10:16, "Behold I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves...." He is sending them on a dangerous mission. And yet he says in verse 26 of the same chapter, "So have no fear of them...." And then he says in verses 28-31, "And do not fear

those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather hear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. For not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Now as an Old Testament saint, Obadiah did not have the clearer understanding of the afterlife that we have in the light of the resurrection of Christ and the New Testament revelation. The Old Testament understanding of what happened at death was rather murky compared to what we know in the light of the New Testament. But nevertheless, it is clear that what God was requiring of Obadiah here was a radical trust in him regardless of the consequences for his physical wellbeing. God was not guaranteeing to protect Obadiah from Ahab’s wrath, but he was expecting Obadiah to be more concerned with obeying God than with what Ahab might do to him.

I don’t know if Obadiah knew Psalm 23, but as a follower of the LORD he would have known the truths expressed in Psalm 23 and Psalm 23 expresses the attitude of trust that God expects from his people. Psalm 23:4 says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

What we need to fear is disobeying God. If we are doing what God tells us to do, there is no reason to fear and the Bible makes it clear that God expects his people to have the kind of trust in God that excludes fear. As Psalm 118:6 expresses it, “The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” Jesus speaks of this as well in his farewell message to his disciples. In John 16:33, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

This theme is always important for us, but there is a special application of it in our day and age in our society as well see more and more clearly the hatred of the world for the followers of Christ and as we wonder what the future might hold for us and for our children. On one sense fear for what the future might hold is understandable, but it is clear that God calls us to a radical trust in him no matter what the future might

hold. We are called to live in the light of the truth of God and the truth of the gospel and the truth of the fact that Jesus is sitting at God's right hand. We are a minority surrounded by the hatred of the world. But John writes in 1 John 4:4, "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

We are called to live in the light of God – his victory in Christ – his love – his power – his plan. We honor God if we live with confidence in him no matter what our circumstances might hold. The church is not to be fearful, but joyful and hopeful and confident in the victory of God in Christ. Think of what Jesus writes in Revelation 2:10, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

God does not promise us a life of ease and comfort. We can be thankful for the this-worldly pleasantness that God has given us and, as we have seen recently, one of the ways that we can live to the glory of God is to receive God's gifts with thanksgiving. But there is always the danger of a sense of entitlement. There is always the danger of idolizing this-worldly pleasantness so that it is more of a priority to us than the enjoyment of God.

Our fears point us to our idols. God calls us to a radical trust in him and putting him before anything else in our lives. And the call not to fear is based on the fact that the most important things in life are untouchable and completely secure because the love of Christ is untouchable and completely secure for those who are within the will of God. Fear points us to our idols. Fear points us to things in our lives that are more important to us than God and his will for our lives. The biblical calls "not to fear" require a radical trust in God and a radical submission to his will. In our text Obadiah was showing a fear because he was prioritizing his physical wellbeing over his relationship with God and in that way it points us to the biblical calling for the people of God to a radical trust in God.

This is not to say that Obadiah was not a faithful follower of God. Obadiah mentioned how he had hidden 100 of the prophets of the Lord

from Jezebel's murderous attempt to silence the word of the Lord by killing his prophets. Obadiah had shown great zeal and courage in danger. He had put his life on the line in order to preserve the lives of some of God's prophets.

But that does not stop the Lord from asking more of him. The Lord does not deny that Obadiah had served him faithfully in very difficult circumstances. Obadiah seems to be suggesting that since he had been faithful to the Lord in protecting those prophets, the Lord should not send him into a situation in which he is likely to be killed. But clearly that is not how the Lord was thinking about the matter.

The Lord requires everything of us. God is God and we are not God and one of the things that that means is that we owe our very lives to God. And God may well send us to our deaths. God may well require that we be obedient to him even unto death. The demands of the Lord do not stop when we have given a lot as Obadiah had done. If we have served the Lord faithfully and courageously as Obadiah had done it does not exempt us from further sacrifice all the way unto death. This is the implication of the call to put God before anything and everything else in our life. It means that we are to put obedience to God before our physical lives.

And that belongs to the good life that is the experience of God's people. It is not that God is not treating us well if he calls us to serve him even unto death. It is not that the people of God who are called to give their lives in his service are getting a raw deal. The principle is expressed in Psalm 63:3 which says to God, "[Y]our steadfast love is better than life." We are infinitely better off with the love of God and nothing else than having everything else and not having the love of God.

Now as it turned out God was not calling Obadiah to give his life at this point. Instead Elijah assures Obadiah that he would not disappear, but that he would surely show himself to Ahab. Verse 15 says, "And Elijah said, 'As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.'" And verse 16 says, "So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah."

These words of Elijah showed where the power lay in this situation. Obadiah had envisioned Ahab with the power and Elijah in danger so that the Spirit of the LORD might carry him away for his protection. But that was not the situation at all. It is the word of the Lord which is orchestrating this meeting. God was summoning Ahab to this meeting. Ahab was being summoned to be confronted by the word of the LORD. Elijah was not appearing from a position of weakness, but from a position of infinite strength and greatness because he was representing the LORD of hosts.

It is significant that Elijah here refers to the LORD as the LORD of hosts. Earlier when Elijah had appeared to Ahab to announce the drought, he had referred to God as the God of Israel. This was an assertion that the LORD and not Baal was the God of Israel. But now Elijah refers to God as the LORD of hosts. Obadiah had to understand more of the greatness and the power of God compared to Ahab. Van't Veer quotes a certain Eduard Riehm on the significance of the title LORD of hosts, "The idea that goes with this name especially is 'that the hosts of the heavenly world are at the disposal of Yahweh for His royal purposes, which involves especially the conquest of the enemies of His Kingdom so that His people will be protected – all those to whom He shows grace.'" (p.173)

Isaiah 31:5 is a passage that shows us this significance of the title "LORD of hosts." "Like birds hovering, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it; he will spare and rescue it."

Our text this morning is all about the greatness and power of God compared with the apparent greatness and power of Ahab and it teaches us to look at our life-situation in the light of this perspective. What Obadiah needed to see and what we need to see is something of the greatness and the power of God compared to the apparent greatness and power of the rulers and the powerful people of this world. On the face of it, the church is tiny and weak. There is no this-worldly power. There is the power of government. There is the power of money. There is the power of public opinion. There is the power of the media. There is the power of the hateful mob. We are weak. Small in

numbers. Small in influence. Bearers of a message that most of the people around us find offensive and insulting.

This passage teaches us to look at our situation through the eyes of faith – faith in what the word of the LORD teaches about where the real power lies. We are called to walk by faith and not by sight. We are called to live by faith in the word of the Lord. Just before he gave the church its marching orders which is the great commission Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus sent the church into the world with the message of the gospel which is the message of the word of God and what we have seen from our text this morning is that there is no power that is greater than the power of the word of God.

Our calling is to live in the light of that truth. Our calling is to give God the priority that he deserves and to trust in his love and his wisdom and in his power to bring to its consummation the victory that he has won in Jesus Christ. We find our life, not in focusing on ourselves and our pleasures, but on God and his glory and his purpose.