

240609pm Sermon Transcript

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1 Kings 18:1-16

(This sermon transcript is an extract of a video recording of the full service. The numbering is auto-applied and reflects the number of minutes into recording that the transcript relates to.)

32:09

Well, if you were here this morning, we were thinking about how we respond if we're Christians, how we respond to culture wars.

32:19

We were reflecting on Acts chapter 19 and that dramatic incident in the life of Paul when when he's almost lynched by an angry mob in the city of Ephesus.

32:30

And tonight I want to reflect a bit further on this theme by looking at the story of a man that I think many Christians tend to overlook, a man called Obadiah.

32:43

Now, he's not the Obadiah who wrote the book of Obadiah.

32:46

That was a minor prophet is Obadiah's different and we see him here in Acts in one Kings chapter 18.

32:55

Now I suspect Obadiah's story is is often overlooked because it appears in in a chapter that's dominated by that spectacular and dramatic encounter that the Elijah has on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal.

33:11

It's one of those exciting stories that that you, if you go to church growing up, you kind of, it's a favorite of, of, of Sunday schools, Elijah on the on the mountain encountering the prophets of Baal.

33:24

And because that's the, the big focus in the chapter, I think we tend to overlook these earlier verses in this chapter that tell us about Obadiah.

33:32

And I think if we do overlook those verses, that's a real shame because we will, we will miss out on learning what God was doing in this man's life.

33:44

If we look at the lives of God's people in the Bible and in history, there's not always a straightforward, simple way of living faithfully for the Lord in a hostile world.

33:54

We need wisdom.

33:56

Sometimes it's right to take a stand like Elijah, to courageously confront the sins of our culture.

34:05

But sometimes it's good to serve the Lord quietly under the radar, like Obadiah.

34:14

I've got a slide of Queen Esther, I think.

34:17

I don't know if you know the story of Esther.

34:18

She's an interesting example where we see both of these approaches earlier in her, in her time, she was, she was living in the in a Pagan empire.

34:29

She was the queen and her Jewish identity and her faith in God were hidden for some time.

34:37

It was a very difficult situation for her to be in.

34:40

But a day came when she had to choose.

34:44

Was she, was she going to risk her life for God's people or was she going to stay hiding?

34:51

And that's famous line in Esther where she says, I'm going to go to the king, even though it's punishable by death.

34:57

I'm going to go to him to talk to the king about my people.

35:01

And if I perish, I perish.

35:05

As Christians, we often have to grapple with this issue of, of living in a hostile society because actually most times in history, most societies are hostile to the gospel.

35:18

Even today in places like North Korea, just being found to be a Christian is a death penalty.

35:26

In Afghanistan, you can, you can be a Christian.

35:30

It's not banned to be a Christian, but it's illegal to share your faith.

35:35

It's illegal to say anything negative of Islam, and it's illegal to convert from Islam.

35:42

If you do, that is punishable by imprisonment or death.

35:46

Now, life in the UK is nowhere near as oppressive or dangerous as those places, but life in this country is getting harder to be a faithful Christian.

35:58

As the beliefs and values of our society are shifting more and more away from our Christian heritage.

36:05

Christians are increasingly seen as dangerous and divisive.

36:12

Now God is sovereign.

36:13

God is the ruler of the world.

36:15

God has decided that we would be born in this place at this time.

36:21

The question we have to ask ourselves is, are we going to live faithfully for him and what might that look like?

36:29

So our theme tonight is serving God in a hostile world.

36:34

Now, before we dive into this chapter 18, I just want to set the context for you if you're not so familiar with one and two Kings.

36:41

They, the two books tell the the story of a period in the life of Israel where the Kingdom was split in two.

36:49

There was the Kingdom of Israel in the north of the country and the Kingdom of Judah in the South.

36:56

And in the two books of Kings, they tell the story of the slow spiritual decline of both of those kingdoms.

37:04

The trajectory is away from God and towards idolatry.

37:10

The people are breaking God's covenant and despite many warnings to them time and again, they stubbornly continue on their self-destructive path towards judgment.

37:23

First the Assyrians are going to come.

37:25

They're going to wipe out that northern Kingdom of Israel, and then many years later, the Babylonians will come.

37:31

They will defeat Judah and they will exile the people.

37:36

So the two books, they're quite bleak books in some ways, but there is a thread of hope that runs through them.

37:43

God is going to keep his promises.

37:45

God is going to save his people.

37:50

Now in one Kings chapter 17 before our chapter we're looking at tonight, we're introduced to this great prophet Elijah.

37:57

And in chapter 17, God calls him and he goes and he confronts Ahab, the wicked king of the northern Kingdom of Israel.

38:08

He confronts him and he says because of the people's idolatry, there will be no rain on the land.

38:14

This was this was a curse that God had given in Deuteronomy.

38:18

If you turn your backs on me, if you break my covenant, there will be no rain.

38:23

And it was a mockery of, of Baal, Baal, who they were all worshipping.

38:28

He was supposed to control the weather where there's going to be no rain for three years.

38:33

Elijah confronts Ahab and Ahab's fuming and God takes Elijah and he he hides him out sends him out into the wilderness to hide.

38:41

He protects him and he provides for him miraculously with Ravens in the in the Kidron Valley and then through a widow in Zarephath.

38:52

Now chapter 18 picks up the story of Elijah three years later.

38:58

OK, there's been three years of no rain.

39:02

So we there read there in verse one, after the long time in the third year, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah.

39:08

Go Elijah, go and present yourself to Ahab.

39:10

I'm going to send rain on the land.

39:14

So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.

39:17

God's about to graciously bring an end to the drought and the famine, but not before the people repent.

39:26

And for that to happen, Elijah is going to have to confront Ahab, confront the people and call them to repentance.

39:35

So the focus of Chapter 18 is in many ways, that big dramatic showdown on Mount Carmel.

39:40

But before that happens, Elijah bumps into Obadiah.

39:47

And when I first read this chapter, I was thinking, why is this here?

39:51

Why are these verses in this chapter?

39:53

The books of Kings are incredibly compressed history.

39:57

They span hundreds of years.

39:59

Why have we got this funny little story about Obadiah?

40:02

And why did God lead Elijah to meet Obadiah?

40:07

It could have taken him straight to Ahab.

40:09

Why get Obadiah involved?

40:14

I think God wants to teach us something through his dealings with Obadiah.

40:21

Sometimes serving the Lord in a hostile world.

40:23

It does mean confronting evil head on like Elijah, but my conviction as it often means quietly serving the Lord behind the scenes like Obadiah.

40:39

So our first point tonight as we look at this, these verses on Obadiah, our first point is serving God subversively.

40:47

Serving God subversively.

40:51

Now you might not know, but Obadiah's name means one who serves Yahweh.

40:58

And that's a perfect name for this guy.

41:01

He is such a servant hearted man.

41:04

He serves others, but he ultimately serves the Lord.

41:10

In verse three, he's described as King Ahab's palace administrator.

41:17

This was basically the chief steward of the whole palace.

41:21

He was in charge of of the King's household.

41:25

And the closest I could think about this in sort of more recent times in our kind of culture was if any of you have seen Downton Abbey, you'll know, you know, Mr.

41:34

Carson and Mrs.

41:35

Hughes, they were kind of the the chief stewards of the household.

41:39

They were in charge of all the all the house.

41:41

Well, Obadiah was the palace administrator for Ahab and Jezebel.

41:47

And verse five, he's he's tasked by Ahab to go and search for food for the horses and mules.

41:54

It's a time of famine.

41:55

All the animals are going to die and we know behind it die.

41:59

It just, you know, bumps into Elijah.

42:01

It's no accident in verse seven.

42:04

And look at his whole posture.

42:06

Soon as he sees Elijah, what does he do?

42:08

Verse seven, he bows to the ground and he says, my Lord.

42:12

And throughout this passage he keeps referring to Elijah as his Lord and as as Ahab as his master.

42:24

This guy is a servant, but his ultimate allegiance is to the Lord.

42:30

If you look at there in verse 3, just after telling us of his role in Ahab's palace, what does it say?

42:35

Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord.

42:41

The ESV translates it.

42:43

He feared the Lord greatly.

42:48

He he reminds me of Joseph.

42:50

Remember the story of Joseph when he's in Egypt, elevated to this position of of, you know, kind of the right hand man of Pharaoh Joseph, a godly man serving a Pagan king in Egypt, or like Daniel in those years where he was in exile serving Persian kings in that Babylonian empire.

43:15

These men served Pagan kings.

43:18

They did it with wisdom, with skill, with integrity.

43:22

They were entrusted with much, and yet none of them compromised their faith in those places.

43:31

Their first loyalty was always to the Lord.

43:34

They served others, They even served idol worshipping kings, but they ultimately served the Lord.

43:42

And we see Obadiah's devotion to the Lord in verse four.

43:46

While Jezebel was killing the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken 100 of prophets, hid them in two caves, 15 each, and he supplied them with food and water.

44:00

Just pause for a moment and, and it's good to notice here there's an important lesson.

44:04

God had protected and provided for Elijah all those years miraculously, but here he protected and provided for these hundred prophets through Obadiah's sacrificial service.

44:19

It's an important lesson for us.

44:21

God uses ordinary people, ordinary faithful servants, quietly serving Him.

44:27

Don't ever underestimate the great good that you can do simply by quietly serving the Lord.

44:36

Well, in the context of Elijah's dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal later in this chapter, it's easy to overlook Obadiah and to overlook his bravery in what he did for those prophets.

44:50

Just try and put yourself in his shoes for a moment.

44:52

Can you imagine living and working in that palace with Ahab, this wicked king, and Jezebel who's going around killing the Lord's prophets?

45:08

Living with that constant danger of being discovered any moment, like a like a secret agent behind them, enemy lines in enemy territory.

45:21

If you're a Christian, you may feel like that sometimes in this life, in this world, in this culture, and in some ways you are.

45:28

Satan is at work.

45:29

We are in a spiritual battle.

45:34

Well, at any moment, Obadiah's secret harboring the Lord's prophets could be found out.

45:38

Any moment His, his identity as a worshipper of Yahweh could be discovered.

45:44

And then what would happen?

45:47

He'd be for the chop.

45:50

Now, some scholars look down on Obadiah as a coward and a compromiser.

45:56

They compare him to Elijah, you know, the bold confrontational prophet.

46:01

And they think Obadiah is is wanting.

46:04

But I'm really not convinced of that criticism of Obadiah.

46:09

One commentator I've I found very helpful on this is Dale Ralph Davis.

46:14

He says, you know, we shouldn't sit in judgement from our comfortable armchairs on Obadiah just because he's not Elijah Junior.

46:25

I think it took us much courage to secretly serve the Lord under the noses of Ahab and Jezebel as it took Elijah to confront Ahab openly.

46:38

And if Obadiah was this kind of cowardly compromiser, why take the risk to hide these hundred prophets?

46:47

You know, we should take the narrator's assessment of him.

46:50

He was a devout believer, a servant of the Lord.

46:55

He loved and feared the Lord more than he feared people.

47:00

And his example reminds us that God works through his servants in different ways at different times.

47:07

Sometimes God confronts evil head on through an Elijah, but often he subverts evil through his servants like Obadiah.

47:20

This week we've been remembering the 80th anniversary of the D-Day Landings.

47:25

I think I've got a picture coming up.

47:27

D-Day Landings.

47:28

If you know the story, you know Hitler's forces were confronted head on by those courageous troops who stormed the beaches of Normandy.

47:40

It's right that we give thanks for their sacrifice, but let's not forget the brave men and women in the Dutch resistance.

47:51

We met the next slide, people who secretly hid Jews from their persecutors, providing them with food and shelter at great risk to their own lives.

48:04

Recently we watched ATV series based on a true story.

48:08

It's called A Small Light, and it tells the true story of a Dutch lady called Meep Geese, and she had a crucial role in in harboring Anne Frank and her family from the Nazis.

48:25

Sometimes it's right to confront evil head on, but sometimes it's better to serve the Lord subversively.

48:33

That doesn't mean we have to keep our faith secret.

48:36

We're not living in North Korea, are we?

48:40

But don't underestimate the good that God can do through you as you live quiet lives of godliness.

48:49

Can I just as an aside, just a slight digression.

48:52

When I was at university, I was in a in a student group called the Navigators.

48:56

I don't know if they've got one of those in this region, but the Navigator was a fantastic student group and it was very hot on evangelism.

49:06

But the challenge was that as a student, you felt that you had to be this amazing evangelist, you know, and going to lectures and standing up in the middle of the lecture and giving a, you know, an open air sermon in in front of your class.

49:18

It was this kind of burden and pressure to always be initiating evangelism.

49:23

And around that time, a housemate of mine was studying the book of Colossians.

49:29

And he came and woke me up.

49:30

I was in bed asleep.

49:31

He banged on my bedroom door and he woke me up.

49:33

He said, Andy, you've got to read this, You've got to read this.

49:36

And just a slight digression that he was he was looking at Colossians.

49:40

And there's these wonderful verses in Colossians chapter 4.

49:47

So let me grab it briefly.

49:49

And and you, you see an interesting dynamic going on here.

49:52

Paul writes to the church.

49:53

He says, devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

49:57

Pray for us that God will open a door for our message so we can proclaim it clearly.

50:04

But be wise in the way you act towards outsiders.

50:06

Make the most of every opportunity.

50:08

Let your conversation be full of grace.

50:11

Season with salt so you'll know how to answer everyone.

50:17

And my friend had been reading this commentary by **** Lucas in the Bible Speaks Today.

50:22

And **** Lucas's comments on those verses, he says they're wonderfully liberating.

50:28

Paul says pray for those of us who've been set aside to preach the gospel, Preachers, missionaries, evangelists, pray for us that God will open the door for our message.

50:39

And As for you, live godly lives, live lives that are distinctive so you will know how to answer everyone.

50:49

Do you see the difference?

50:51

We shouldn't beat ourselves up about kind of going to work or going to college or school, feeling like we've got to be preaching all the time.

50:59

For the ordinary Christian, God wants us to live godly lives that arrest people's attention and raise questions and then we can respond and share the gospel with them.

51:14

That's the first lesson here, serving God subversively.

51:19

The 2nd and final lesson is faith that overcomes fear.

51:25

Faith that overcomes fear.

51:29

I've already mentioned that Ahab was working in Ahab's palace.

51:34

This was a time of, of apostasy in in Israel.

51:39

Obadiah is living.

51:40

He's working for this wicked king, this Bale worshipping king and his wife who is going around murdering the prophets.

51:50

Talk about a hostile work environment.

51:53

This was this tops it all.

51:56

Yeah.

51:56

In his devotion to God, Obadiah secretly hid 100 of the Lord's prophets.

52:01

He provided with them food and water, and that was at great cost and risk to himself.

52:08

As far as we know, this has gone on for three years during a time of famine.

52:14

You know Ahab doesn't care about the people, doesn't care about their idolatry.

52:19

All he cares about are his horses and his mules having enough food to eat.

52:25

Well, Obadiah is undercover actions to preserve the lives of these prophets.

52:29

It took great courage, but it doesn't mean he was fearless.

52:36

When Elijah tells Obadiah to go and tell Ahab that he's here to meet him, look at that passage, verse 9.

52:45

Obadiah is terrified at the prospect.

52:50

Try and put yourself in this man's shoes.

52:52

What have I done?

52:54

You're handing me over to Ahab to be put to death, assured as the Lord lives.

52:59

There's not a nation or Kingdom, my masters not sent someone to go and look for you.

53:03

Whenever a national Kingdom claimed you weren't there.

53:06

He made them swear you could not.

53:07

They could not find you.

53:08

But now you're telling me to go and see my master and tell him you're here.

53:13

I don't know where the spirit is going to take you.

53:19

The Lord may carry you away.

53:20

And if I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he'll kill me.

53:25

Yeah.

53:26

I your servant.

53:26

I've worshiped the Lord since my youth.

53:29

Haven't you heard what I did while Jezebel was killing all the prophets?

53:33

I hit 100 in two caves, 50 in each.

53:36

I supplied them with food and water.

53:37

Now you're telling me to go to this master of mine and tell him you're here, He will kill me.

53:48

Obadiah is not fearless.

53:53

He's been living with the fear of being found out for three years under that constant threat of being discovered and put to death.

54:04

Can you imagine the psychological pressure this man has been under?

54:10

Now, his fear was very reasonable in God's Providence.

54:15

In the mystery of God's Providence, he's allowed Jezebel to kill many of the prophets.

54:22

Being a devout believer doesn't make you immune to suffering.

54:27

Obadiah's fearful response to Elijah shows that he is simply aware of his mortality.

54:34

Now again, some want to criticize him.

54:37

Some see him as a coward, a weak man.

54:41

But again, I think Dal Roth Davis hits the nail on the head.

54:44

He says some see Obadiah as a compromiser, a boss, serving, career protecting, life preserving fence straddler.

54:55

He's clearly afraid of Ahab.

54:57

He's afraid that Abrahah will execute him if he heralds Elijah's return.

55:01

He alludes to it three times.

55:04

Imagine that.

55:06

A servant of the Lord who would prefer not to die.

55:12

Is that so strange?

55:16

Maybe Obedo's concerns were not entirely selfish.

55:20

If he dies, what's going to happen to these hundred prophets He's protect, been protecting and providing.

55:25

For now, Elijah is not fearless, but he is a man of faith.

55:33

He's a man of faith and he doesn't let his fears paralyze his faith.

55:40

His faith in God overcomes his fear of man.

55:47

Grab the next slide.

55:49

I've been mentioned D-Day.

55:51

Some years ago I saw ATV series called Band of Brothers.

55:55

Again, it's based on true story.

55:56

It was a book by historian called Stephen Ambrose and it follows Easy Company, who were a squad of soldiers who were in the 101st Airborne Division.

56:06

They were some of the first soldiers that parachuted into Normandy in the early hours.

56:12

And it's a very moving series.

56:14

It's 10 parts, but, you know, if you get to see it, I found the most moving moments in every episode.

56:22

It was just a few minutes every episode.

56:24

They had the short interviews with the guys who'd survived, the veterans.

56:30

Here's a picture of some of them.

56:33

And time and again, in those interviews, these men who you see portrayed in the series as having such courage, time and again they said we all were afraid.

56:46

We all had fear, but we didn't let that fear stop us.

56:52

I'm doing what was right.

56:54

They had faith in their training.

56:57

They had faith in each other.

57:01

Obadiah had something even better.

57:04

He had faith in God, Almighty God.

57:10

He overcame his fear because he trusted in the king of heaven.

57:16

And I love the fact that Elijah doesn't rebuke him.

57:19

You know, when Obadiah expresses his fear of being killed, Elijah doesn't rebuke him, does he?

57:24

What does he do?

57:25

He reassures him.

57:29

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

57:36

Obadiah, don't be afraid, brother, don't be afraid.

57:43

And that's enough for Obadiah, isn't it?

57:45

He doesn't say another word.

57:46

In fact, we didn't.

57:47

Read on to verse 16.

57:49

But he takes Elijah at his word.

57:51

He trusts in God, and then he goes to Ahab, verse 16.

57:55

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab.

57:57

He told him that Elijah's here.

58:03

It's a really important lesson here.

58:04

True courage is not being fearless.

58:11

True courage is not letting your fears stop you from doing what is right.

58:17

Nobodies a great example of faith overcoming his fear and we could add his name to many others.

58:25

The you know the roll call of faithful believers in Hebrews 11.

58:30

Go and read Hebrews life and later and read those people.

58:34

Read those verses in the light of their lives.

58:38

They weren't great heroes, you know superheroes.

58:42

They were men and women like us who felt their weakness, who felt afraid at times, and yet they lived and they conquered by faith.

58:57

Think about the the great apostle Paul, probably the greatest missionary, whoever lived.

59:03

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he said, I came to you in weakness and with great fear and trembling.

59:15

In two Corinthians he says, you know, we were, we were troubled in Asia, far beyond our ability to endure.

59:21

We were overwhelmed.

59:22

We felt under a sentence of death.

59:26

But this happened so that we might rely on God.

59:31

He has delivered us and he will deliver us again as you help us by your prayers.

59:39

Jesus is our greatest example, surely, as he faced the prospect of going to the cross and bearing God's wrath against all our sin in the Garden of Gethsemane.

59:55

He sweat drops of blood, He said my soul is overwhelmed to the point of death.

1:00:08

He fell face down and he prayed.

1:00:11

Father, if it's possible.

1:00:13

May this cup be taken from me, but not my will.

1:00:16

Your will be done.

1:00:18

Even the eternal Son of God in the flesh felt overwhelmed, but it didn't stop him from going to the cross.

1:00:32

The application for us is that faith overcomes our fears.

1:00:41

Most of us are unlikely to face the real threat of death for our faith.

1:00:46

But you know there are brothers and sisters in Christ who are facing that possibility even in our day.

1:00:52

I hope you pray for the persecuted church.

1:00:56

We may not face that kind of persecution, but we may go through years in the wilderness like Elijah.

1:01:03

We may live through fearful circumstances like Obadiah.

1:01:07

Some of you may be going through fearful times right now.

1:01:10

I don't know your situations.

1:01:12

Maybe in a different difficult home situation, a difficult educational work environment.

1:01:18

You may have a boss who cares nothing for people, let alone for God.

1:01:26

You may need courage to confront that.

1:01:30

Or you may need the patience and perseverance to keep praying and keep letting your godly example be a silent rebuke.

1:01:41

We're not all called to do great works like Elijah, But if we're Christians, we are all called to do good works like Obadiah.

1:01:54

It won't always be easy knowing how to serve the Lord in a hostile world.

1:02:00

So let's pray for wisdom from God to know what we should be doing.

1:02:05

And let's pray for the faith to do it.