

Obadiah
1 Kings 18:1-16

Introduction

In studying the story of Elijah it is very easy to overlook Obadiah. Elijah strides like a Colossus over the scene. He is the man of God, bold and fearless, and always at the forefront of the action. Obadiah can be overlooked or belittled as of no importance because he was just Ahab's servant, a quiet believer living life in a very difficult position, in the court of Ahab and Jezebel. So his life is largely hidden, and he is not the topic of many sermons!

We must be careful not to under-value men of God who are quiet and retiring, and who do not demonstrate their faith in dramatic and obvious ways. The true servant of God may be serving well under great disadvantages and fierce opposition, but scarcely known and recognized, unlike those on centre stage. Minor stars lose their brilliance when the sun is out-shining them. Yet, though more dominant, Elijah depended on quiet Obadiah in approaching the king. He who never feared the face of kings had need of the help of a far more timid individual.

We need to learn that God has a place for all His servants. Never despise the least, but value and cherish them. **The head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'** (1 Corinthians 12:21). The weakest members of the body are still necessary and have their place. The Lord does not despise them, and neither should we. **To his own master he stands or falls** (Romans 14:4).

We are going to look at the beginning of Obadiah's relationship with God, how he persevered in it, and the way his position in the court of Ahab was used for God.

The beginning of Obadiah's relationship with God

I your servant have feared the Lord since my youth (1 Kings 18:12). We do not know how Obadiah came to fear the Lord in his youth, but it is a fair assumption that it was the result of his parent's influence. The clue is in his name. Obadiah means "the servant of the Lord". Obviously to give a name like that to a child shows they had reverence for God. Obadiah was born in days when there was persecution of God's servants everywhere, and the name of the Lord was in contempt. So to call a child Obadiah required firm conviction and courage by the parents.

Notice how Obadiah described his relationship – "I have feared the Lord". (NIV has "worship", but "fear" is closer to the original Hebrew.) The Bible says much about the fear of the Lord. It does not mean men cower and are terror struck or dread the Lord. It means reverence for the Lord in light of his majesty, having high esteem of things sacred. Fear of the Lord reminds us that God is great and greatly to be praised, and makes us anxious to please Him, concerned not to do wrong, and causes us to maintain a tender conscience.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10). **What does the Lord ask of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love Him, to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul** (Deuteronomy 10:12). **Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king** (1 Peter 2:17). So this was a requirement for God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. Blessings are promised to those who fear God. **God will instruct him in the way chosen for him** (Psalm 25:12). **How great is your goodness which you have stored up for those who fear you** (Psalm 31:19). **His mercy extends to those who fear him** (Luke 1:50).

Obadiah did not just say he believed, or obeyed, or loved the Lord, but that he feared Him. Fear means reverence and awe, something we need to be reminded of today, when so much worship is of "the all-matey God". Fear of the Lord ought to be reflected in our prayers, the way we talk of God, preach about Him, and the words we use in our hymns and choruses. The words spoken to Moses need to be remembered when we come into His presence: **Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground** (Exodus 3:5).

This had been Obadiah's experience from the beginning of his life. It is always good to belong to the Lord. It is wonderful when people are saved after years in the far country, and made children of God. The change is so great that we cannot but admire God's grace and power, "trophies of grace". These conversions are lessons to all around. Yet it is also beautiful when people belong to the Lord from their earliest days. It means they are saved from thousands of regrets, having learnt early in life to have the best of companions, to make their friends in the church and not in the pub, to be helpers in virtue and not companions in vice. They are saved from evil habits which are often hard to throw off once learnt. There are many things they do not have to unlearn, and they are saved from many sorrows and a great deal of shame. No heavy weight of bad memories to carry through life. They are not troubled by scars and sores earned during years of service of the devil.

How we ought to pray and work for the conversion of children and grandchildren early in life. How we ought to support and encourage those who work among the young. Give thought and support, especially at this time of year, to special efforts at the seaside and in the country to win the young for Christ.

Persistence of Obadiah's relationship with God

In declaring that he has feared the Lord from his youth, Obadiah implies that he is still going on with the Lord. He is where he has always been down the years. This is confirmed because of the comment by the narrator at the beginning of his account, **Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord** (1 Kings 18:3). Fear and reverence for the Lord began in his youth, and was still growing and developing. The passing of time had not changed him. Years made no difference. He remained faithful in times of temptation, when others fell away, times of adversity and times of prosperity did not affect him, persecutions and discouragements left him unscathed. He maintained that relationship with God even though the whole nation had turned its back on God – led by the king and queen, when heathen religion was everywhere and worship of the true God was banished. Obadiah had no teaching or fellowship to keep him true to the

Lord. He was living in the headquarters of heathen religion – the royal palace – in close contact with the king and queen of all people. Yet he remained faithful to God.

Why he remained at the palace, we do not know. Maybe he was exceptionally good at his job. Or maybe Jezebel wanted to get rid of him, but Ahab decided to keep him, just to show Jezebel who was boss. Maybe Ahab could not do without Obadiah. How difficult it is to stand for God and be entirely on your own, e.g. the only Christian in the home, family, street, or workplace. Some never see another Christian from one Sunday till the next. There are faithful ministers in churches where they receive no sympathy from office bearers or members. Some people belong to churches where there is little help and no teaching at all. They can all take inspiration from Obadiah's life.

Loneliness, isolation, whatever the circumstances, it is impossible to emphasise the difficulty. No matter what knowledge and experience the Christian has, it is harrowing to be alone. Isolation from other Christians has caused the spiritual temperature of many a Christian to decline, like a coal taken out of the fire. Only those who have been through it know. They are driven back on the Lord and His Word as never before. This is the only way to survive.

Paul knew this experience. **At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me... But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength** (2 Timothy 4:16,17). We need to pray that support may be given to us in our hour of need. Hear the Lord's promise: **'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'**. **So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'** (Hebrews 13:5,6).

Remember then, we need to succour and encourage the lonely ones, for they are so easily overlooked.

Proved reality of his relationship with God by using his office to further God's cause

Obadiah felt he could do something for the cause of God. He was the chamberlain of the palace, which was an important office with great influence. He did all he could for God's cause. He saved the lives of at least one hundred of the Lord's prophets by hiding them in caves, and feeding them and giving them water to drink (1 Kings 18:4). He protected them from the bloodthirsty queen. He watched over them and did not betray them. He must have taken quite a risk in doing so. Observe how generous and hospitable he was. He staked his life and used his own purse on quite a grand scale.

It is often claimed that Obadiah was a compromiser, that he could not have held such a job unless he turned a blind eye to wrong-doing, and that he should have spoken up instead of remaining silent. Yet there is no proof that he was like that. There are others in the Bible who have proved that it is possible to hold high position in an ungodly court without loss of principle. Joseph feared God in the court of Pharaoh. Daniel was the trusted counsellor of Nebuchadnezzar. Pilate's wife pleaded for Jesus at His trial. Paul wrote to the saints in Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22).

Also in the history of the church. John Wycliffe (1324-1384), who made the first attempt to translate the whole Bible into English, met fierce opposition from the authorities, and some followers paid with their lives. But Wycliffe was kept safe because of John O' Gaunt Duke of Lancaster's protection. Also Luther, after his stand at Worms, was protected by Elector Frederick of Saxony in Wartburg Castle, because there was danger of him being hanged or burnt.

And yet there is a warning here for us. Being in Ahab's palace in a position of honour, meeting and mingling with those who were enemies of God, constantly tempted to compromise, frequently facing extreme difficulty in serving two very different masters – Obadiah was in constant spiritual danger. C.H.Spurgeon warned, "His course was like walking a tightrope. I should not like to try it myself, nor would I recommend any of you to attempt a feat so difficult. The part of Elijah was much safer and grander. He had not to please but to reprove Ahab. He had not to be wary but to act in a bold outspoken manner for God." A very important point is being made here.

How often people feel that we need to belong to the world and influence it from within, to join in with it and be part of its amusements and conviviality. The same argument can be used about marriage to a non-Christian, and for joining in business enterprises with the world, or joining a church with no definite and clear evangelical message. We may think we should go into these arrangements and influence them from within, but the reality is that in most cases, this does not work. In very few cases, absolutely sure that God has a purpose, and certain of not being compromised, it may work. But in most cases, it leads to compromise instead of influence. We hope to make the world rise to our level, but end up sinking to the world's level. We find ourselves living with an uneasy conscience, turning a blind eye and silent tongue to much that is wrong, and impossible to resist the downward pull.

The safest place is outside Ahab's court, outside the camp, heeding the Lord's call, **Come out from them and be separate** (2 Corinthians 6:17). We can be more effective witnesses if we are outside the camp than we can if we are encircled by the camp. That is the lesson from history. As Scripture puts it, *in* the world, but not *of* the world (John 17:16). The church which admits the world will soon become more worldly than the world will become Christian. The safest and strongest position, for the vast majority, is outside the camp, not with Obadiah in the palace.

Conclusion

Obadiah knew God from his earliest days. His faith persisted with the passage of years, and ultimately he was able to use his position for God. Appeal to the young: **Remember your creator in the days of your youth** (Ecclesiastes 12:1). And yet it is never too late to turn to the Lord and live for Him, to go and work in the vineyard even at the 11th hour. Consecrate your gifts, talents, and position to use as God wills.