

1 Kings 18:1-15

Introduction

Last week we started looking at the story of Elijah. He is one of the great figures of the Old Testament, and lived in Israel during the reign of King Ahab, somewhere around the middle of the ninth century B.C.

Ahab's reign marked a dark period in the history of Israel. He changed Israel's national religion from the worship of the one true God to the worship of the fertility non-god, Baal. And he brought a fanatical Baal-worshipper, Jezebel, into the corridors of power as his wife.

And so the verdict on Ahab wasn't good. We're told that **[he] did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.**

But just as Baal seems set to win the day, suddenly, Elijah burst onto the scene. His name means literally 'The LORD is God' and his appearance tells us that God is about to act. He announces, through Elijah, that there would be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at his word. Israel was coming under God's judgement.

As we come to chapter 18 this morning, we jump forward three years, and we're told that there had indeed been famine – bad news for Baal, who was supposed to be a fertility god. It turns out he is impotent.

But now the one true God, who really does control the powers of nature, has determined to send rain once again.

Verse 1: 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.

God is about to send rain once again. He won't do it immediately, however, otherwise the Baal worshippers might claim that Baal has suddenly recovered and rediscovered his powers. He's got his mojo working once again. So, before God sends rain, Baal must be publicly and decisively discredited. What follows will culminate in a head-to-head contest between God and Baal, which we'll get to next week. And through all of this, God is challenging the Israelites to decide who they will give their allegiance to, the Lord their God or Baal, the pretender.

That contest is just getting started. And our passage this morning is full of encouragements to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord our God.

And the first encouragement is this: God's good purposes cannot be thwarted. That's our first heading.

God's good purposes cannot be thwarted

Please look again at the end of verse 2: **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.)**

Last week we left Elijah deep in Baal country, in Zarephath, where he was staying as the guest of a widow and her son. And presumably he remained there, quietly and well provided for, until he was sent off once again to present himself to Ahab.

We've seen that the situation was desperate in Israel. It had appeared that Baal worship was taking over. And we might have feared that Elijah was the only faithful Israelite remaining. Up until now, we've had no indication that there were any others who had remained loyal to the Lord God.

It's a relief, then, when Obadiah comes onto the scene.

Obadiah's name means literally, 'Servant of the Lord'. We're told in verse 3 that **[he] was a devout believer in the LORD.**

And it's clear that his devotion to the Lord was not simply a private affair. His faith in God had propelled him into action.

So now, in addition to Elijah, we learn that there are a hundred more of the Lord's faithful people in Israel, who are being kept safe and well provided for through the action of God's faithful servant, Obadiah.

Those hundred prophets are a living monument to Jezebel's failure; for we had been told that Jezebel had set about hunting down and **killing off the LORD's prophets.** Her intention was to silence the Lord's voice in the land. She had set out to remove completely his life-giving word from Israel.

But the Lord's purposes will prevail. No man or woman can stand against him.

There's a transcript of a radio conversation that took place between a US naval ship and the Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995. It was released by the Canadian Chief of Naval Operations in November that year:

Americans: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say, divert YOUR course.

Canadians: No. I say again, you divert YOUR course.

Americans: This is the Aircraft Carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States' Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees North, that's one-five degrees North, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse - your call.

It's a bit like that with God. The most well organised, forceful, intimidating of human powers can go head-to-head with him, but the outcome will be the same. God's purposes will prevail. He is unmovable. He will achieve all his good purposes for his people and no man or woman can divert him from his course.

And that should encourage us no end. No matter how determined people are in this country to silence his voice and to push the Christian faith to the periphery of public life, they will not succeed. We can trust ourselves wholeheartedly into his service without fear, knowing that his good purposes cannot be thwarted.

That's the first encouragement for us. The second arises from an observation about the difference between Elijah and Obidiah. It's this. God calls us to faithfully serve him as we are. That's our second heading.

God calls us to serve him as we are

I think we see that in verses 5 onwards.

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.

As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognised 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."'

Immediately, Obadiah's legs turn to jelly.

'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 worshipped 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!

One thing was for certain; Ahab didn't have a sense of humour where Elijah was concerned. To Obadiah this sounds like a suicide mission, and he doesn't like it one little bit.

It's worth pausing to observe that Obadiah's a very different person to Elijah! Both of them are brave and courageous, yet in different ways. They have very different personalities. Elijah seems bold and confrontational, whereas Obadiah seems cautious and fearful. Elijah has publicly opposed Ahab. Obadiah has worked quietly in the background. Two very different people, yet they are both faithful servants of the Lord.

The Bible doesn't demand that you and I be like Elijah if we're to serve God. God calls us to serve him as we are. Role models like Elijah are helpful, but it's foolish to try to be someone you're not.

The story's told of a battle that was won in the American Civil War. The Army of the Cumberland surprised Confederates by scrambling up, what was known as, Missionary Ridge and overrunning the Confederate's strong position. Apparently, when the jubilant Major General arrived at the top he leapt on to one of the just-captured Confederate cannons, twirling his cap and riding the gun like a horse. One of his Brigadier Generals thought it would be a good idea to copy him and leapt astride another cannon – only to regret it immediately. The cannon had only just been fired and was still scolding hot. It burned the poor man's backside so badly that he couldn't sit down for another two weeks.

God calls us to faithfully serve him as we are, not pretending to be someone we're not.

I think that's a great encouragement.

Perhaps there have been times when you've thought to yourself, 'I'm just not like others here at Emmanuel. I'm not particularly good at organising things. I'm not confident and outgoing. How can God use someone like me?'

But God doesn't insist on squeezing us all into the same mould.

Rather, he calls us to faithfully serve him as we are...here at church, in our homes, our workplaces and among our friends. We're not called to be flamboyant or eloquent, we're simply called to be faithful and to serve him as we are, as the opportunity arises.

That's the second encouragement. The third is this. It won't be easy, but God's promises sustain us.

God's promises sustain us

Obadiah is a man we should admire. He's a man who's caught in the middle between two masters. On the one hand he's a senior civil servant, in charge of Ahab's palace. On the other hand, he's the Lord's servant – remember, his name means literally, 'Servant of the Lord'. Two masters, but his allegiance is beyond question. He's devoted to the Lord and he's proved it beyond all doubt.

Even so, this incident with Obadiah is a reminder to us that serving the Lord isn't always easy. Obadiah knew it wasn't just his job that was at stake when he sided with the Lord. It was his life.

And there will be times for us too, when we find ourselves caught in the middle and faced with difficult and costly choices.

Perhaps for us here the choices will be between loyalty to our families and loyalty to God. Perhaps it will be a choice between loyalty to our employer and loyalty to God, or to someone who's special to us and loyalty to God. Faithfulness to God often comes at a cost. It wasn't easy for Obadiah, and it won't always be easy for us.

But Obadiah had a promise to trust, and so do we.

Obadiah's promise came from Elijah, the man of God. Obadiah was anxious that he would go to Ahab with the news of Elijah's appearance only to find that Elijah had vanished. But Elijah gave him a promise. He promised to present himself to Ahab just as he had said, and he would do it that very day. Obadiah need not fear.

Look at verse 15: **Elijah said, 'As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today.'**

Obadiah had a promise to trust from Elijah, the man of God. And we have promises too. The Bible's full of promises to us.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, and he gives us this wonderful promise: **'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'** (Matthew 28:20).

The writer to the Hebrews says: **...God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'**

And he goes on: **So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.'**

Those are words that we can make our own as we live our lives for Jesus: **'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.'**

Faithfully serving the Lord won't always be easy, but God's promises sustain us.

Conclusion

So then, through Elijah, God is challenging the Israelites to decide who they will give their allegiance to, the Lord their God or Baal, the pretender.

And it's the same challenge for us today. Who will we give our allegiance to, the Lord our God, or any number of false gods that we might live for?

And here are three encouragements to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to our God. Firstly, His good purposes will prevail. No one can stand against him. Secondly, He calls us to serve him as we are. We don't need to pretend we're someone we're not. And thirdly, His word sustains us. He promises never to leave us or forsake us. Wherever we're serving him and seeking to be loyal to him, he's with us always.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, you are steadfast and faithful. No power can withstand you. You are almighty and your purposes will prevail. And you promise to be with us, wherever we find ourselves serving you this week, whether at home, at work, or with our family and friends. So please, strengthen our faith. Give us confidence to cling to you without fear. And please be glorified through us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.