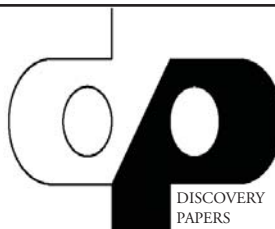


ONLY ONE MASTER (THE TROUBLER OF ISRAEL)

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



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1 Kings 18:1-19
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All of us struggle with the temptation to serve more than one master. In what area of your life do you experience tension between what the Lord is calling you to and what other voices are calling you to? Where might you compromise your faith? These questions are good ones to consider as we re-enter our study of 1 and 2 Kings.

In 1 Kings 17:1 (Catalog #5201), the prophet Elijah declared to Ahab, king of Israel, that it would not rain until he spoke again in obedience to the Lord. The resulting drought was an intervention by God, intended to bring his people back to himself, to warn them of the disaster to which Ahab's idolatry was leading them.

In 1 Kings 18 we encounter four individuals and their experience of learning from God during the drought. We'll see a different response in each of them. We considered Elijah in the last message. During the three and a half years of drought, he spent time alone with God in the wilderness, and in the home of a poor widow as both an instrument and a recipient of grace. Elijah experienced the drought as a time of learning and connection with God, a time of change of heart and growth.

Jezebel's name will come up in this passage. Jezebel is someone who never even for an instant pays attention to the Lord God, his word, or his concerns. She enters the text with the hardest of hearts, and grows worse. She will march to her death and judgment with a stiff neck. The drought might have warned her, but she has no interest in being warned. So on the one hand, Elijah is being shaped by God during this period. On the other hand, Jezebel is growing harder in her rejection.

There are two other names in chapter 18, Ahab and Obadiah, and those are the ones we're going to pay attention to in this message. I hope their stories will be a challenge to us to wake up, to care about important things, and to listen carefully to God.

1 Kings 1-4:

¹Now it happened after many days that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth." ²So

Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. ³Ahab called Obadiah who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly; for it came about, ⁴for when Jezebel destroyed the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water.)

When the world gets darker

Obadiah was an official in the palace of Ahab. We don't know anything about his background, except that a bit farther on he will say he has been devout from his youth. He was an ordinary son of Israel who was raised with the Scriptures and the worship of God. He may have belonged to a family that allowed him to be educated and rise to some point of competence and authority. Evidently he was bright, honest, hardworking, disciplined, and successful in his work. But the world had grown darker.

Ahab was hardhearted and unrighteous to begin with and he gets worse over time. In his marriage to Jezebel he invited the terrible religion of Baal-worship to enter the land. Ahab encouraged Jezebel's aggressive replacement of the worship of God with the worship of Baal. The world became more violent and worship became degraded. Obadiah found himself making the king successful by his hard work, but the king had become a darker and more terrible person and evil was spreading.

The author of 1 and 2 Kings says Obadiah revered the Lord greatly. This comment does not come from the mouth of the prophet, and it is not claimed to be God's analysis. It is the author's opinion of Obadiah. But I think we'll do well to listen to Obadiah's story and hear him speak, because many of us will find that we ourselves have his struggles and his challenge to serve both Ahab and God.

1 Kings 18:5-6:

⁵Then Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys; perhaps we will find grass and keep the horses and mules alive, and not have to kill

some of the cattle.” **“So they divided the land between them to survey it; Ahab went one way by himself and Obadiah went another way by himself.**

This is not kindness to animals on display here. Ahab is concerned about no one but himself. Horses and mules were military equipment and Ahab is protecting his military power as his first priority.

Now listen carefully to the speech of Obadiah in the next verses. You can sense his tension, anxiety, and nervous energy. He seems to be talking too fast and saying too much. He wants to make sure that everybody understands that he’s on their side and has a good opinion of him.

1 Kings 7-19:

⁷Now as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him, and he recognized him and fell on his face and said, “Is this you, Elijah my master?” ⁸He said to him, “It is I. Go, say to your master, ‘Behold, Elijah is here.’” ⁹He said, “What sin have I committed, that you are giving your servant into the hand of Ahab to put me to death? ¹⁰As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent to search for you; and when they said, ‘He is not here,’ he made the kingdom or nation swear that they could not find you. ¹¹And now you are saying, ‘Go, say to your master, “Behold, Elijah is here.”’” ¹²It will come about when I leave you that the Spirit of the LORD will carry you where I do not know; so when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth. ¹³Has it not been told to my master what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, that I hid a hundred prophets of the LORD by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water? ¹⁴And now you are saying, ‘Go, say to your master, “Behold, Elijah is here”’; he will then kill me.” ¹⁵Elijah said, “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.”

¹⁷So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah. It came about when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, “Is this you, you troubler of Israel?” ¹⁸He said, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, because you have

forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. ¹⁹Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

The end of the drought is coming. The lessons from the drought have either been learned or not. Events are about to take a dramatic turn.

What do we learn about Ahab and Obadiah in this story? Let’s look at Ahab first.

Indifferent to God

You probably know somebody like Ahab. He assumed that he was in control of events. Raised the son of a king and now a king himself, he inherited a secure and prosperous nation. He imagined himself smarter than everybody else. He knew how to get things done. This drought was a temporary setback. Elijah was claiming some sort of intervention from heaven, but he didn’t believe it. He had a new religion that he brought into the lives of the people, and one religion was as good as another. Baal was making him successful, and he was determined to stay the course. “Drought or no drought, I’m going to command my world. Circumstances have gone well before, and they’ll go well again. Nothing ever really changes if you just know how to take control.” Ahab was busy issuing orders, consolidating power, saving his army’s strength, and putting himself first.

Notice that Ahab blamed the spokesman of God rather than dealing with God. “You troubler of Israel, Elijah—this is all your fault.” He spent this whole period of three and a half years issuing threats—sending spies and emissaries out to various places, looking for Elijah. What is his assumption in this? “If I can find Elijah, I’ll either torture him or bribe him so he will speak a word that will end the drought. The prophet claims some sort of God connection, but it’s really a human being that I’m dealing with.” He’s focused on the people of God, not the God of the people. What Ahab never considered was that God himself might be near, and that he might have had a word for this nation and its king.

Elijah’s approach to Ahab gives us further insight into the type of person that Ahab was. First, in verse 15 Elijah spoke to Obadiah, but he uttered a very significant phrase: “The LORD of hosts ... before whom I stand.” He used a similar phrase, “the LORD God of Israel ... before

whom I stand,” when he spoke to Ahab in 17:1. The NIV translates verse 15, “The LORD Almighty ... whom I serve.” The assumption is that the phrase “stand before” in reference to a sovereign is an idiom meaning to be the servant of the sovereign. That is a reasonable assumption in some settings. But I don’t think that’s the way “stand before” is being used here. I think it’s being used more literally. Elijah is saying, “I actively turn my attention to God. I hear his voice and I speak to him.” I would suggest that he means something even more dramatic than that: “Wherever I stand, I stand in God’s presence. There is no place where he is not present. I am standing now in God’s presence. He is here now, in control, and attentive.” Ahab rejected the notion that the living God might have a word for him, but Elijah insisted on it.

Second, Elijah took the accusation of Ahab and turned it around. When Ahab called him the “troubler of Israel,” Elijah said, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals.” What really causes trouble in human experience? It’s not drought, hard circumstances, challenges, or unexpected difficulties. What causes trouble ultimately is sin at the core of who we are. It’s the decisions we make to ignore the righteous commandments of God. What causes trouble is kings who lead their nation away from the Lord toward pride, self-promotion, and the worship of idols; who teach their people to worship in degraded and ugly ways, to prefer the things of this world rather than the things of God. Embracing pride, self-promotion, and unrighteousness destroys a nation.

The last thing that Elijah said to Ahab, who’s not listening, is that judgment is coming. In order to make the point, Elijah told Ahab to bring all Israel to Mount Carmel. Now a clash of beliefs will be made apparent. Things aren’t going to stay just the way they’ve been. This description of Ahab is sounding a warning to us to beware of the deadening nature of closed ears, idol worship, and self-sufficiency.

But most of us who are concerned with this text are not defiant of God. We’re more like Obadiah. Let’s consider his story.

Serving two masters

Obadiah found himself unintentionally in a terrible place. He was an ordinary, good man who cared about God. He even courageously obeyed God and protected some people who otherwise would have been killed.

He took this action for the right reasons. But he was in a position that had become dark and evil, he served an awful king and his terrible wife. The more he made Ahab successful, the more he destroyed what God cares about, and now he was at a crossroads. He had two voices that he feared, two masters, two allegiances, and they clashed. You could sense that Obadiah on the one hand wanted Elijah to speak a word of God’s approval. But on the other hand he was scared to death of Ahab—“He’ll kill me!”

Most of us at some time or other have recognized that there are two masters calling for us to obey them. We love Christ and want to serve him and obey him. But we have a network of demands that we can’t seem to get free of, the requirement of allegiance to time, money, competition to succeed at work, and so on. We’re not given the option of doing both and there’s no easy way forward. Perhaps you have found yourself in circumstances where the thing you’re doing has become darker than you meant for it to.

What help can we get from this story for a life like Obadiah’s, which is everywhere around us? First of all, be sure that our circumstances are known to God. We are not where we are by accident. We are facing pressures that we need to be honest about. Often the first response is to try to ignore it, keep our head down and just keep the wheels spinning as fast as we can. We’re scared, hopeless, desperate, and worn out, but we don’t know what else to do, so we’re just going to keep hoping it will go away. But we need to face where we are, turn to God with it, admit that we’re in pain, and acknowledge that he understands what’s happening to us.

Jesus said two things that I think can help us in this. He said, “No one can serve two masters ...” (Matthew 6:24). He said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). Now if we take those together, what is he saying to us? First, we have to decide, “I have only one Master. I cannot have two. Jesus Christ is my Lord. He is my core identity, and it will never change.”

But having decided that we have only one Master, there is a set of responsibilities that we also have. We have responsibilities to Caesar and to God. We have responsibilities to the job we work at, and we have responsibilities to raise our children. We have responsibilities to the laws of our land. As God’s servant, not shuttling between two masters, we still need to live out our life making hard decisions about what is right and what is wrong.

Finally, I would remind us that God intends only good

for us. Remember the imagery of Hebrews: “He had to be made like his brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest ... we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15). When we cry out, “Lord, give me a way to be faithful, help me to say no when I need to, help me understand what the tensions are,” he’ll listen and respond. He is a faithful high priest who understands, who won’t reject us. He knows we’re in a hard place, and he has help, wise counsel, and strength to offer. He will help us navigate our choices and understand how to be faithful to him with the myriad of responsibilities that are placed before us.

One of the wisest prayers in the Bible came from the lips of a desperate man. He came first to Jesus’ disciples. His son was sick and his life was in chaos. This man didn’t know what to do. The disciples couldn’t help him, but Jesus came later and began to speak to him. Jesus told him, “All things are possible to him who believes,” and immediately he cried out this prayer: “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:23, 24). We might express it, “Lord, I do trust you, but I am really struggling ... hurting ... confused ... weak.” Take a moment now and pray that prayer in your own heart, in your own language, and pray for others around you who are struggling as well.