

“Behind Enemy Lines”

1 Kings 18:1-19

Turn in your Bible this morning to the eighteenth chapter of 1 Kings, and we will read beginning with verse 1 in just a minute. I have in my library a book that is titled, “Behind Enemy Lines.” It is the biography of a woman named Marthe Cohn. She was a Jewish woman who served the Allied forces as an intelligence officer during World War II. Born in 1920 to a Jewish family in Metz, France, she was fluent in German. After the Nazi occupation, she and her sister helped many of their fellow Jews escape. Her sister was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where she died. Her fiancé was also executed by the Nazis. Cohn posed as a German nurse and crossed into German territory to gather information about troop movements. Her intelligence work placed her in serious danger, but proved essential to the Allied cause. Her story is a powerful illustration of courage when surrounded by danger. She used the abilities and resources she had to help others by going behind enemy lines. A similar thing happens in 1 Kings 18.

This chapter records the account of Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, which serves as the apex of Elijah’s ministry. Everything that we have seen so far in his story has prepared him for this moment. Elijah is one man against the world, or so it seems. But I’ve heard it said that God plus one always equals a majority. Of course God doesn’t need anyone to constitute a majority—He is God! However, we discover from this text that Elijah is not the only servant of God in his generation. There are other faithful servants of the God of Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. And one of them is mentioned in these verses which we’ve read, a man by the name of Obadiah. You’ll notice that much of the text is an exchange that takes place between Obadiah and Elijah in which Elijah reveals his intentions to stand before Ahab.

And from this, we're able to discern some important truths about serving God faithfully when you're in the minority.

Now, that might be something that you can identify with. It will be an encouragement to those of you who live or work in a secular environment. You may be the only Christian in your group or among your coworkers. And as difficult as it may be for you, God has you there for a reason, and your presence makes a bigger difference than you may realize. There's a sense in which a believer is living behind enemy lines. And by saying that, I don't mean that the people of the world are our enemies—they're our mission field—but that we live and work and go to school and everything else in a world that is under the influence of the devil. He has blinded the minds of unbelievers to the truth of the gospel. As those who know and love Jesus, you and I are called to go 'behind enemy lines' so that we might rescue as many people as we can. In this passage, Elijah is sent by God into a hostile environment where he will be called upon to give witness to the truth. Obadiah serves faithfully inside the king's household without compromising his faith. And Ahab sits on Israel's throne while leading the nation away from the Lord. Three men who are mentioned in this text—Elijah, Obadiah, and Ahab—yet they do not share the same allegiance. Let's consider each of these men and see what we might be able to learn from their lives:

1—Elijah: FOLLOWING the Lord (18:1-2)

“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.’ So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria.”

In verse 1, the Lord tells Elijah that the time had come for him to show himself to King Ahab. Nearly three years had passed since he had confronted Ahab. Elijah has been in hiding, waiting for the right time to speak. He has been in preparation, and now the time had come for presentation. What should stand out to us is the fact that Elijah is a man who is led by the Spirit. He takes his direction in life from 'the word of the Lord.' That expression shows up in these chapters some 15 times. Elijah isn't making his decisions on the basis of his own feelings, but is following the Lord's leadership in his life. Pay close attention to the emphasis on God's direction that is given to Elijah. God is giving him clear direction, but it comes only one step at a time. Earlier in chapter 17, God had said to him:

"Hide yourself" — 17:1

What was the significance of God's direction at this point in Elijah's life? God takes him from public view, takes him to Kerith, and then takes him to Zarephath. The reason for it had to do with God's purposes in forging Elijah's character as a man. Seasons of obscurity come before seasons of visibility. Before a tree can branch out, its roots must grow deep. That's the value of those 'hidden' seasons I spoke about a few weeks back. Elijah has been in obscurity, and he has learned some things about God's provision.

We live in a day where people want to bypass the process of preparation and go straight to some platform. We have people who have all these platforms, but there's been no process of character formation in their lives. And even in Christian ministry, people have been given a platform, but there's been no process of preparation in their life. Before securing leaders within the church, Paul said to Timothy:

1 Timothy 3:6—“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”

The worst thing that can happen is for someone to be given a platform for which they are not ready. They may have a gift that takes them places, but they don't have a character that can keep them there.

“Show yourself”—18:1

The time comes when God says to him, “Show yourself to Ahab.” His preparation must now give way to presentation. Elijah cannot remain faithful while at the same time remain on the sidelines. Verse 10 reveals how Ahab had been in search of Elijah, and how there hadn't been any nation or kingdom where the king had not sent to seek him. What is interesting is that Elijah had been hiding in Jezebel's own turf the whole time. God had been providentially caring for Elijah until it was time for him to confront the king again. It is God who is setting the agenda, not Ahab. The Lord had withheld the rain the past three years because of Israel's idolatry. And now God says to Elijah, “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.” God sends the prophet, and then God will send the rain. It is all a picture of His sovereign authority as Lord.

Job 5:8-10—“As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause, who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number: He gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields.”

God does great and unsearchable things. And someone says, “Like what?” Would you have answered, “He gives the rain!” I read a devotional paragraph from John Piper this week about this very thing. Listen to what he writes:

"Is rain a great and unsearchable wonder wrought by God? Picture yourself as a farmer in the Near East, far from any lake or stream. A few wells keep the family and animals supplied with water. But if the crops are to grow and the family is to be fed, water has to come on the fields from another source. From where? Well, the sky. The sky? Water will come out of the clear blue sky? Not exactly. It will have to be carried in the sky from the Mediterranean Sea, over several hundred miles and then be poured out from the sky onto the fields. Carried? How much does it weigh? Well, if one inch of rain falls on one square mile of farmland during the night, that would be 27,878,400 square feet of water, which is 17,378,744 gallons, which is some 145,032,570 pounds of water (similar to a herd of 10,830 fully grown African elephants). That's heavy. How does it get up in the sky and stay up there if it's so heavy? It gets up there by evaporation. What's that? It means that the water sort of stops being water for a while so it can go up and not down. How does it get down? Well, condensation happens. What's that? The water starts becoming water again by gathering around microscopic dust particles. Ok, what about the salt? Salt? Yes, the Mediterranean Sea is salt water. That would kill the crops. What about the salt? Well, the salt has to be taken out. So the sky picks up the millions of pounds of water from the sea and takes out the salt and then carries it for three hundred miles and then dumps it on the farm? No, it doesn't dump it. If it dumped millions of pounds of water on the farm, the wheat would be crushed. So the sky dribbles the millions of pounds of water down in little drops. And they have to be big enough to fall for one mile or so without evaporating, and small enough to keep from crushing the wheat stalks.

How do all these microscopic specks of water that weigh all these millions of pounds get heavy enough to fall? Well, it's called coalescence. What's that? It

means the specks of water start bumping into each other and join up and get bigger. When they are big enough, they fall. And what's that? That's called precipitation. The water cycle includes evaporation, condensation, coalescence, precipitation. I'm satisfied that, by any name, it is a great and unsearchable thing that God has done. I think I should simply be thankful that He does!"

God says, "Go, Elijah, and I'll send the rain." And in spite of the risks involved, Elijah obeys the word of the Lord. We will see this a bit more in a minute, but obedience is one of those things that cannot stay in private for long. For there's really no such thing as secret discipleship. At some point or another, our devotion to God will cause us to stand out from the crowd. Our lives as Christ's disciples will be lived in a different direction and for a different purpose than that of an unbeliever. Jesus said as much:

Matthew 10:32-33—“So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven.”

The Christian's faith is personal, but it is never private. It will always involve confessing Christ before other people, whatever that may look like. So Elijah is following the Lord. In addition to Elijah, notice the text also mentions:

2—Obadiah: FEARING the Lord (18:3-16)

“And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.)”

The scene shifts from Elijah to a conversation that happens between Ahab and someone we're introduced to in verse 3 named Obadiah. His name means 'Servant of the Lord,' which will prove to be a fitting description. He's not to be confused with another Obadiah mentioned later in the Old Testament in the book that bears his name. The Obadiah who is mentioned here in 1 Kings 18 may be an obscure character, but he is one who is important to the story.

The position that he held

Verse 3 says, "And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household." Which is to say that he is a chief administrator of Ahab's house. He's the guy that Ahab relies on to carry out daily tasks and responsibilities, the administrator who kept things running smoothly. He's the Gregory Shaver of the house of Ahab. He took care of all the details so that Ahab could focus on being king of Israel. And that means Obadiah must have been a man of ability, someone who could be trusted because he held a position with enormous responsibility. He is in charge of everything that happened in the palace. He has oversight of all the servants, the waiters, the helpers, and all the people who came in and out to see the king. This certainly meant that Ahab must have known him well and placed a great deal of trust in him and his abilities.

The faith that he possessed

Notice we're also told in verse 3 that Obadiah is someone who feared the Lord greatly. He has an influential position, and he is a worshiper of God, though he is surrounded by all sorts of compromise. I mean, he works for King Ahab! He has a job in the administration of the most wicked king that Israel ever had. His employer is a man who doesn't share his same convictions and values. Obadiah has been described as a 'palm in the desert' because he stood for the Lord in a

time of great national apostasy. When others were turning to idolatry, this man would not bow the knee to Baal. Yet he somehow managed to serve the Lord and to keep his high position, even while serving a king bent on leading God's people astray.

Some people have a problem with this. There are some who have taken the position that Obadiah is a compromiser and coward. F.B. Meyer, in his study of Elijah's life, draws a sharp contrast between Elijah and Obadiah. He makes the argument that Obadiah had made a compromise with the world, and that if he were truly a man of God, he would have taken his stand and been fired by Ahab long before. He writes:

F.B. Meyer — *“Though Obadiah was a good man, there was evidently a great lack of moral strength, of backbone, of vigorous life, in his character.”*

It is obvious that Obadiah was not as courageous as Elijah, but let's not forget that he doesn't have the same calling as Elijah. If he had compromised his integrity for the sake of his job, verse 3 wouldn't describe him as being a man who feared the Lord greatly. His faith is on display through his actions described in verse 4, “And when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.” That's a man who took a risk, a man who had courage to do the right thing. He may not have the same gifts and calling as Elijah, but he uses what influence he has to serve Heaven's interests. And I tend to agree with Charles Spurgeon, who took a different approach with the character of Obadiah. He said:

C. H. Spurgeon — *“I suspect that Elijah did not think very much of Obadiah. He does not treat him with any great consideration, but addresses him more sharply than one would expect from a fellow-believer. Elijah was the man of action—*

bold, always to the front, with nothing to conceal; Obadiah was a quiet believer, true and steadfast, but in a very difficult position, and therefore driven to perform his duty in a less open manner. His faith in the Lord swayed his life, but did not drive him out of the court.”

Don't assume that others aren't making a contribution to the kingdom simply because they don't have the gifts or personality as someone else. Not everyone can be Elijah. Not everyone can be the apostle Paul. But that does not mean that the Obadiah's in the kingdom are not important and don't have an equal contribution that they can make.

I've heard it said that in the Lord's army there are prophets and there are priests. The prophets are called by God to speak boldly, rebuke sin, and call people to righteousness. The priests are called by God to see the hurting people all around them and to minister healing in Jesus' name. We see the dichotomy often in dealing with moral issues like abortion and homosexuality. In a prophetic sense, we are called to denounce these sins, and in a priestly sense we are called to minister to those hurt and ruined by these sins. I have observed that the prophets rarely understand the priests, and the priests don't appreciate the prophets. Prophets often look at the priests as soft and weak, while the priests see the prophets as harsh and uncaring. But both are called by the Lord and both have an important role to fulfill. Jesus is the perfect Prophet, Priest, and King!

The assistance that he gave

In verse 5, King Ahab sends Obadiah on a reconnaissance mission of sorts in which he is to scout out any usable land for pasturing the king's livestock. The famine was severe in Samaria. Things had dried up everywhere. And you can

hear the concern in Ahab's words, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals." Ahab goes in one direction, while Obadiah goes in another. He is trusted with a task, with a responsibility, and he does it well.

The picture that I want you to see here is that of a believer who is working for an unbelieving boss. A Christian who is working in a secular environment. Is that something that you can identify with? Like Obadiah, you may be the only believer where you work, or among those you've been assigned to work with. They don't talk about the things you like to talk about, they don't share the same convictions that you have nor do they live for the same things. But you have a job to do. And the way that you go about your daily responsibilities will have a greater impact than you realize. If you find yourself in a position where your job will require you to compromise your faith, you have to remember that you serve a much higher Lord. You refuse to follow orders, out of an issue of conscience, a vocational disobedience of sorts that your integrity demands. In that situation you trust God to take care you, just as He did with Daniel and his friends. Obadiah isn't compromising his faith to work for Ahab, though he is surrounded by all sorts of wickedness.

The concern that he expressed

As Obadiah is on his way, verse 7 says that Elijah meets him. Obadiah recognizes him, falls on his face and says, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" The prophet tells him to go tell Ahab that he is here. And Obadiah is fearful that he will say something to the king, only for Elijah to be carried off by the Spirit of God to who knows where. But instead of that happening, Elijah assures him that he will indeed be present before Ahab. And so Obadiah runs off to relay the

message to the king. But not before he expresses fear. One thing that we can see in his life is the fear he is living under. If word gets back to Jezebel that he has protected the men she tried to kill, she'd be out to get him. Though he is fearful, notice how that doesn't keep him from doing what Elijah tells him to do. Would to God that we were as fearful of disobeying God as we are of displeasing people!

Proverbs 28:1 — “The wicked flee though no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

Doing the right thing often comes at a great cost. That's true of everyone who names the name of Christ. A godly high school principal has to think carefully about how much or how little to say about the Lord when he is on the job. A Christian judge has to balance the demands of his job with the convictions of his heart. It's the same for lawyers and pharmacists and teachers and businessmen and women and anyone who rubs shoulders with the people of the world. You will often find yourself in situations where you need godly wisdom and courage to know how to respond without compromising your convictions. Occasionally you will have to do things that others will not understand. By God's grace, you'll know what to do when the time comes, and you can trust that He will give you the courage to do the right thing.

3—Ahab: FORSAKING the Lord (18:17-19)

“When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, ‘Is it you, you troubler of Israel?’ And he answered, ‘I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father’s house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the

450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

Never have there been any two more different men who square off against one another. On the one hand there is Elijah, who is following the Lord. And on the other, there is Ahab who is forsaking the Lord. Elijah has character, Ahab has none. Elijah serves the Lord, Ahab serves the Baals. Elijah has been in a place of obscurity, Ahab has been in the palace at Samaria. Two very different men, two very different approaches to life.

The accusation that is charged

Notice in verse 17 how upon seeing Elijah, King Ahab says, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" The 'troublemaker' finally decides to show up! He is accusing Elijah of being the one who is responsible for the disaster which has taken place in the land. And isn't this the rationale of the God-hater in our own time? If you Christians would just get with the times, if you would quit thumping your Bibles, if you would just stop being so backwards, we'd finally make some real progress. But we can't support the wholesale slaughter of human life and call it choice. We can't endorse same-sex marriage as something holy and sanctioned by God. We can't idly sit by while there are those in our culture who are adamant on mutilating children and call it 'transgender healthcare.' We might get labeled as the troublemakers, but we cannot call evil 'good' and darkness 'light.'

The apostasy that is confronted

Look at what Elijah says in response in verse 18, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals." In other words, you're the one who has brought this calamity upon Israel. What you see happening are the

consequences of your sin and your disregard for the truth. If people are not confronted about the reality of their sin, they will have no way of repenting of their sin. Repentance and reconciliation to God is the goal, and there is no way for that to happen without confrontation with the truth.

The assembly that is called

In verse 19, Elijah calls for an assembly in which he issues a challenge, “Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” It is a challenge of authority. Who really is Lord?

I want to close by reminding us of something which is very important. There is sense in which you and I live our lives ‘behind enemy lines.’ Though we are not ‘of’ the world, we are ‘in’ the world for a purpose. The world is our mission field! The people of the world—the men and women and children—they are not our enemy, but our mission field. It is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, spiritual wickedness in heavenly places. And the Enemy has blinded the minds of people and holds them in darkness. The church is on a rescue mission in the world. God has entrusted to His church the message of divine deliverance. And that’s the gospel. We must be fearless and faithful in our proclamation of the gospel. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. That’s what Romans 10:17 says. But a few verses earlier, Paul says:

Romans 10:13-15—“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to

preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’

You and I are ‘sent’ on mission behind enemy lines. That means we leave our comfortable Christian enclaves for the sake of rescuing as many people as we can. Where you are in the world on a daily basis, that’s your mission field. You might feel intimidated. You may be overwhelmed. You may in fact identify somewhat with Obadiah in this text. He loved the Lord, yet he struggled with fear when obedience became dangerous. You love Jesus, but perhaps you also fear rejection, professional consequences, or simply being misunderstood. In an age of Ahab, pray that God raises up more Elijah’s and Obadiah’s. Courage and integrity in the face of spiritual compromise. This passage exposes our need for more than just an example of courage. We need a Savior who strengthens our obedience and empowers our witness.

Jesus lived with perfect faithfulness in a world that rejected Him. He obeyed the Father all the way to the cross, where He bore the sins of fearful, timid people like us. Through His resurrection, He gives us a living hope that no hostile boss, unbelieving relative, or antagonistic culture can take away! Our salvation rests securely in Him. Therefore, we can enter whatever difficult environments we face, knowing that we already belong to Christ and don’t need anyone else’s approval to be secure. We can serve others selflessly, speak truth graciously and boldly, and obey God when obedience is costly. And we do these things because we know that we are forgiven and accepted in Christ, while relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. Let’s pray.