



Your Work Matters More Than You Think

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Scripture:
1 Kings 18

Series: [The Surprising Influence of a Godly Life \(6/10\)](#)

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Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly...) (1 Kings 18:3)

God has his people in some surprising places. We have seen this already in the story of the widow of Zarephath. God sent Elijah to this lady, who must have seemed the most unlikely person to be in a position to help him.

After all, she had no resources of her own, only a willingness to trust God and walk in obedience. Even more surprising, she was a widow in *Zarephath*, and Zarephath was in Sidon, the home territory of Jezebel!

God called Elijah to confront the Baal worship that was now shaping the people of God. The icon of Baal worship is Jezebel, Ahab's chosen queen.

The heartland of Baal worship was her home in Sidon (1 Kings 16:31).

God's servants are called to unlikely places

"Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold I have commanded a widow there to feed you." (1 Kings 17:9)

Elijah must have said, "A widow where? Lord, you call me to confront the idols and you send me to the place they come from?"

"Yes, Elijah, there is a woman who will honor me in Sidon, the home of Jezebel, the heartland of idolatry."

Ahab is scouring the country looking for Elijah, and God is providing for Elijah right in Jezebel's own backyard. Perhaps Elijah would have remembered David's words, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Psalm 23:5).

Today we meet God's servant in another unlikely place. His name is Obadiah and he serves as King Ahab's chief of staff. Obadiah tells Elijah, "I your servant have feared the Lord from my youth" (1 Kings 18:12).

Here is a godly man and God has put him in the palace, next to Ahab.

Remember that Ahab did more evil in the sight of God than all the kings who came before him (1 Kings 16:30).

We are told that Jezebel “cut off the prophets of the Lord” (1 Kings 18:4). She launched a campaign of persecution and terror against those who spoke the word of God publicly. This campaign was run from the palace.

Imagine the darkness of this palace with its evil king and its wicked queen. This is the capital of darkness, yet there is a man who “fears the Lord greatly” and his name is Obadiah.

My aim is to encourage every Christian who has been called by God to serve in a dark place. The Bible speaks to every circumstance of life and the surprising testimony of Obadiah will help you today.

If you have a difficult boss, imagine what it would have been like to work for Ahab! If you find that your work puts you in the middle of difficult ethical decisions, imagine what that was like for Obadiah!

Where God Placed Him THE DIFFICULTY OF HIS CALLING

God puts his people in places of influence for purposes of grace. You find this all through the Bible.

Think about Joseph: God puts him at the right hand of Pharaoh in the court of Egypt—not a comfortable place for any believer. But through Joseph, food was supplied for the family of God. Who but God would have thought of that!

Think about Esther: God put her in the court of King Ahasuerus. It’s hard to imagine the pressures this godly woman must have been under. But through her, God’s people would be delivered from a holocaust.

Think about Daniel: God put him in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. Imagine how difficult that was! Yet it was all in the good purpose of God.

In the New Testament we read about Joanna, the wife of Chuza, who was Herod’s household manager (Luke 8:3). She was one of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning.

Imagine being a believer Herod’s palace. That was where the head of John the Baptist was brought on a plate during one of Herod’s wild parties. Yet here is Joanna, a faithful follower of Christ hidden in the palace.

And it would be easy to skip right over Paul's words, "the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22). There were Christian believers at the highest level in the Roman Empire: "The saints... of Caesar's household."

How did these people get into these positions? They were highly gifted. They were people of integrity, so they were trusted, and God gave them favor in the eyes of leaders at the highest levels of society.

God places his people in surprising places of influence for surprising purposes of grace.

This was Obadiah's story. The king's first calling was to fear the Lord and write down all his commands, so he learned to walk in his ways. Ahab didn't do that. But God placed someone next to him who did.

Many of you will relate immediately to Obadiah, who loved the Lord but lived and worked in a place that must have torn him apart. Maybe you are serving a company where many things make you deeply uncomfortable. You say to yourself, "I am a Christian. Should I even be here? How long can I go on working for these people?"

But if you are looking for a career in which you won't experience conflicts of conscience, you have very limited choices:

Christian teachers ask, "How can I work with this godless curriculum?"

Christian pharmacists ask, "How can I serve these pills over the counter?"

Christian lawyers ask, "How can I defend this client?"

Christian bankers ask, "How can I invest in this company?"

Christian politicians ask, "How can I support this compromise?"

The list goes on and on. It's the real world in which Christians live.

Many of you face intense pressures in your career. You ask yourself, "Should I even be doing this?" And you wonder, "Is it possible to be a Christian and pursue a secular calling in this world that is increasingly hostile to our faith? Can I stay or should I go?"

Then you think, "Maybe I can get a job in ministry. Maybe I could become a pastor or a missionary or work for a nice Christian organization. Then I wouldn't have to deal with these pressures. The darker the world becomes, the greater the pressure on Christians to withdraw.

It's not easy to live in Obadiah's shoes. His career as Ahab's chief of staff is of huge importance for every Christian who struggles with these kinds of questions. Here's what we learn from him: God places his people in every sphere and at every level of life.

I want to especially encourage younger people, as you ask the question, "What is the best that I can do for my God," don't shy away from positions of influence because they are difficult. God calls his people to be lights in very dark places.

God had placed Obadiah in a position of influence in the palace of Ahab.

There were at least 100 men who had been called to preach the Word of God, but there was only one man standing at the right hand of Ahab.

The best that Obadiah can do for his God is not to abandon his job and become the 101st preacher, the best that he can do is to persevere in his high pressure position. Take him out of the palace, and so much is lost.

How God Used Him

THE DISTINCTNESS OF HIS CALLING

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. (1 Kings 18:4)

He couldn't possibly have done this apart from information gleaned from working in the palace. Think about the risk involved in that! Jezebel is killing prophets, and her husband's chief of staff is hiding them in caves.

Think about the cost. He supplied food to 100 missionaries out of his own pocket! Elijah could never have done that! In 1 Kings 18, God brings these two men, Elijah and Obadiah, together.

It's the third year of drought and the search for water is desperate. So Ahab said to his right-hand man Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses..." (18:5).

Horses were the heart of Ahab's national defense. Excavations in Megiddo revealed that he had built huge stables. You get a glimpse of the character of the man from the fact that his first concern is not with the people but with his horses.

The politician and the prophet

So [Ahab and Obadiah] divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself. And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. (1 Kings 18:6-7)

It is quite likely that when Elijah came to the palace and announced that there would be no rain on the land, Obadiah was there. So he would have recognized Elijah, and it's clear from the story that he was absolutely horrified when he did.

Elijah is the most wanted man in Israel. And Obadiah tells him "There is no nation or kingdom where [Ahab] has not sent to seek you." (18:10).

When people say "He is not here," Ahab makes them take an oath. Now Obadiah himself has run right into Elijah. It's the last thing he wanted.

I don't think Elijah had much time for Obadiah either. Later in the story, Elijah gets discouraged and says "I am the only one left" (1 Kings 19:10), which makes it clear that he didn't think much of Obadiah!

Here are two men with different temperaments and very different callings. Elijah is called to a ministry of confrontation. He walks into the palace, announces the Word of God and walks out again.

Everything in Elijah's life has been leading up to the moment of confrontation on Mount Carmel, where God's Word will confront the vested interests and idolatries of the people. Elijah works from the outside—standing apart from and speaking into national life—and God has given him a platform to do that.

But Obadiah has a different calling, and it has to be pursued in a very different way. He has a ministry of influence. He stays in the palace, and he has to be very careful about what he says. He works from the inside and everything in his life is about staying faithful in a situation that often must have felt as if it was tearing him apart.

So, here are two brothers in the faith. One is a prophet and the other is a politician. Their callings are different and their lives have been on separate tracks. But on this one occasion, God sovereignly brings them together in the parched wilderness of Israel.

It's helpful to think about the lives and the callings of these two men, and how they might have affected their view of each other.

Stand in the shoes of Elijah: God has called you to confront the worship of Baal. You feel very alone in this work and now here's this man who is supposed to be your brother in the faith, and you find out that he's working for the king who's out to destroy you.

If you were Elijah you would want to say to Obadiah, "What are you doing working in that palace? How can you possibly serve a king who has done more evil than any who have gone before him?" You might even quote the Bible and say, "Obadiah, come out from them and be separate. Have nothing to do with works of darkness."

But then Obadiah would say something like this: “Elijah, I thank God for your calling, but please understand that my calling is different. You are called to confront from the outside. I am called to influence from the inside. And Elijah, separation is a matter of the heart.”

“God has given me this position next to Ahab. I’ve been able to do things that no one else could do. God put me here. Haven’t you heard how I saved the lives of 100 prophets by hiding them in caves? I know Ahab is an evil king, but God has put me next to him, and that is my calling.”

God gave these men different temperaments and different callings, yet they are brothers in the faith. They are on the same side.

Insights for Inside Influencers

Expect to be troubled

“In this world you will have trouble.” (John 16:33)

In any career you will find yourself torn, because you are in the world but not of it. This world is not your home, so you are serving where you do not belong in a system that will pass away. That will always cause tension.

When you feel pressure to withdraw from your profession because it’s a dark place, please remember—God calls Obadiah’s as well as Elijah’s. He puts his light in some dark places because that’s where it’s needed most.

The best that Obadiah can do for his God is to stand firm and stay right where God had placed him, with all its difficulties, limitations, and questions of conscience that he experiences.

The steadfastness of Obadiah is a great means of preserving the witness of God, and it’s a warning against Christian withdrawal from the world.

Expect to be misunderstood

It is fascinating to me that some writers take a very negative view of Obadiah. F. B. Meyer, a wonderful Christian author, who’s writing I have benefitted from, doesn’t have a good word to say about Obadiah.

For Meyer, Elijah is the hero, Ahab is the villain, and Obadiah is the compromiser, and what use is a compromiser? He is so tough on Obadiah that I think he must have been amazed to meet him in heaven.

Some of you may feel the same way about Obadiah. But the Bible says nothing against him, so why should you? Scripture tells us that Obadiah “feared the Lord greatly,” that he took a

great risk to save the lives of 100 prophets, and that he played an important role in bringing Ahab to Elijah.

Obadiah was a godly man. He might have hoped for some encouragement from Elijah, whom he obviously revered. Perhaps Elijah would thank him for what he had done at great risk to his own life in saving the lives of the 100 prophets. But Elijah shows no warmth to him at all. There is no recognition that these men are on the same side.

Some Christians have it in for anyone who is given a trusted position at a high level, whether it be in the world of business, politics, and increasingly in the church.

If God calls you to be an inside influencer, expect to be misunderstood. When other Christians don't understand your work, remember you're not accountable to them. You're accountable to God. So don't be surprised or discouraged. Don't think, "Something must be wrong with me."

Trust God to keep you

As the Lord of hosts lives, I will surely show myself to him today. (1 Kings 18:14)

Obadiah's great fear is that when he brings Ahab back, Elijah will be long gone. Obadiah has to trust the Word of God, just like the widow of Zarephath, and God proves faithful to his Word.

How could Obadiah survive in the spiritually stifling world of Ahab's palace? God can keep you wherever he has placed you. Spurgeon says:

"Grace can live where you would never expect it to survive for one hour." [1]

That's true in a secular university, as it is true in the world of business and politics. God protected the soul of this faithful man who served in the cesspool that was Ahab's palace. He can do the same for you.

Cautions for Culture Warriors

Don't pass judgment on your brother or sister

An issue comes up in a school and one Christian teacher feels, "This is a bridge too far! This is the place where we have to take a stand." So she goes down the corridor to talk to a second Christian teacher.

The second teacher says to her: "I feel the same as you do, and I respect what you're saying, but I honestly don't think this is the hill to die on."

Suppose you are the first teacher. How are you going to react? The impulse that will rise in you will want to say: “Where is her courage? What is wrong with her? Why won’t she support me? I wonder if she really knows the Lord at all.”

We all face these situations where other Christians don’t see things as we do: In the field of education, there are Christians in our congregation who are called by God to serve on the inside of state education. They might feel that if more Christian families were in the state system a greater difference could be made for good.

There are other families in our congregation who are called by God out of the state education system. They might feel that if more Christian families would take responsibility for the education of their children, a greater difference could be made for good.

Examples could be multiplied, but here’s what matters: Where God has given us the gift of freedom, we must not judge one another: “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” (Romans 14:4).

In matters of conscience, God has given us freedom. All of us have a responsibility to apply the word of God as best we can to the decisions and direction of our lives. Christians will do that in different ways. We must not judge each other, “Accept each other as God in Christ has accepted you” (Romans 15:7).

God has other servants beside you

“I, even I only, am left...” (1 Kings 19:10,14)

It is terribly easy for us in our passion to serve the Lord, to think that we are the only ones who get it: “Nobody else is doing what we are doing.”

That was a constant danger for Elijah, and God reminds him that there are other servants beside him. Spurgeon says:

The Lord may put you my dear brother, who are so eminent, so useful, so brave, perhaps so severe, into a position in which the humbler and more retiring believer, who has not half the grace nor half the courage that you have, may, nevertheless, become important to your mission; and when He does this, He would have you learn the lesson and learn it well, that the Lord has a place for ALL his servants and that He would not have us despise the least of them, but value them and cherish the good that is in them. The head must not say to the foot, I have no need of you. [2]

Your calling is not to greatness, but to goodness

Elijah was a “change the world” person. His mission was to call the whole nation to repentance. His strategy was one of open confrontation on Mount Carmel. God was in that and God used him in a remarkable way. But God has more than one kind of servant.

Here's what is so fascinating to me: Elijah ended his life in great disappointment that God had not done more. Carmel did not lead to the revival he longed to see. But read on in the story of 1 Kings and here is what you will find: In the end Ahab, who did more evil than all who were before him, repented! It's one of the biggest surprises in the Bible.

We're not told if Obadiah lived to see the day of Ahab's repentance, but at the end of the day, Elijah ended up achieving less than he'd hoped, and Obadiah ended up achieving more than he'd expected.

Dale Ralph Davis has this comment that I've found helpful and I think it speaks to all of us who, like Elijah, want to do something great for God:

"You want to see the community changed...You want to see the church built...You want to see the nation transformed...You want to see the world reached..."

How helpful then that Elijah is not God's only faithful servant. Faithfulness is not so dull that it only comes in one flavor. Moreover, your own pride requires the correction this story can give:

You are not called to great works but to good works, not to flamboyant ministry but to faithful ministry, not to be a dashing, but only to be a devoted servant." [3]

[1] C. H. Spurgeon, sermon, "Obadiah," October 19th 1884

[2] Ibid.

[3] Dale Ralph Davis, "1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly," p. 233, Christian Focus, 2007

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