

# ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

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## CHAPTER SIX OBADIAH - A CONTRAST (I Kings 18)

AFTER many days the word of the Lord again summoned Elijah to be on the move. Months, and even years, had passed in the retirement of Zarephath; the widow and her son had become bound to him by the most sacred ties; the humble home, with its loft and barrel of meal and cruse of oil, was hallowed with delightful memories of the unfailing carefulness of God.

It must have been a great trial for him to go; and how great was the contrast that awaited him! He had probably heard of Ahab's search for him through all the neighboring countries. There was not a nation or kingdom whither the incensed monarch had not sent to seek him, demanding an oath from the rulers that he was not in hiding there. It was not likely, therefore, that he would be received with much courtesy. Nay, the probability was that he would be instantly arrested, and perhaps put to torture to extort a revocation of the words which had placed the realm under the terrible interdict of drought. And as he contrasted the tumultuous roar of the waves foaming outside the harbor-bar with the calm peace that reigned in the haven of rest which had sheltered him so long, he might well have shrunk back in dismay. But he had no alternative but to go. He who had said, "**Go hide thyself,**" now said, "**Go show thyself.**" What was he but a servant, bound to obey? And so, with the implicit obedience which has arrested our attention more than once, "**Elijah went to show himself unto Ahab.**"

In this new departure the prophet evidently encouraged himself by the words on which he had leaned when first he entered the monarch's presence, "**The Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand**" (I Kings 18:15). And there may have rung through his spirit a refrain, throbbing with heroic faith, uttered centuries before by a kindred soul:

**"The Lord is my light and my salvation:  
whom shall I fear?  
the Lord is the strength of my life:  
of whom shall I be afraid?  
When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes,  
came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell.  
Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear:  
though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident."**

But, though Elijah's spirit was thus fortified against fear, it must have been very bitter to him to see the devastation which had been wrought in the land.

- The music of the brooklets was still.
- No green pastures carpeted the hills or vales.
- There was neither blossom on the fig tree nor fruit in the vines; and
- the labor of the olive failed.
- The ground was chapped and barren.
- The hinds calved in the field, and deserted their young because there was no grass; and
- the wild asses, with distended nostrils, climbed the hills to snuff up the least breath of air that might allay the fever of their thirst.

And, probably, the roads in the neighborhood of the villages and towns were dotted by the stiffened corpses of the abject poor, who had succumbed to the severity of their privations. We have no idea, in these temperate regions, of the horrors of an Eastern drought. All this had been brought about instrumentally by the prophet's prayer; and it would have been intolerable, had he not eagerly hoped that his people would learn the exceeding sinfulness and evil of sin. **"Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee; know, therefore, and see, that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God."**

Though the famine was sore everywhere, it seems to have been most severe in Samaria. **"There was a sore famine in Samaria."** And it was this famine that brought out the true character of Ahab. We might have supposed that he would set himself to alleviate the miseries of his people; and, above all, that he would have turned back to God; but no - his one thought was about the horses and mules of his stud; and his only care was to save some of them alive. And so he starts on a mission - such as is still undertaken by the petty chieftains of Eastern tribes - to find grass. What selfishness is here! Mules and asses before his people! Seeking for grass instead of seeking for God!

And yet such selfishness is as rife to-day as ever.

Selfishness like this prompts the great ones of the earth to dash myriads of men against each other in the shock of battle, for the gratification of a mere personal pique, and regardless of the untold misery inflicted on thousands of hearts and homes.

Selfishness like this makes men of wealth and fashion loll on beds of down, roll in luxurious carriages, and feast sumptuously every day - indifferent to the hopeless wretchedness of those who earn their wealth, and are paid a starvation wage.

Selfishness like this still spends on an equipage, a horse, a dog, the keeping of a shooting-box, the round of amusements, more than it can afford for the maintenance of God's work, or for the relief of the poor.

Are professing Christians clear in this matter? Are there not many who spend as much on a single dinner-party as they do on the needs of a dying world? And what is this but a repetition of the sin of Ahab, who went out to find grass for his beasts, whilst his to take their chance! Oh that this spirit of selfishness were exorcised by the Spirit of Christ!

- Then missionary societies would not be hampered in their operations for want of funds;
- Then the coffers of charitable institutions would be filled;
- Then many a hard-working toiler would be able to give effect to schemes now blighted and arrested by the east wind of want.

I do not blame Christian men for maintaining themselves in that position of life in which they were called; it is their apparent duty to retain that position as a sacred talent (I Corinthians 7:20, 24). But I cannot understand a man daring to call himself a Christian and spending more upon the accessories and luxuries of his life than he does upon that service of man which is so dear to our Lord. This is surely the selfishness of Ahab.

It is startling to find such a man as Obadiah occupying so influential a position at Ahab's court. "**Obadiah was the governor** (or steward) **of his house.**" Now, according to his own testimony, Obadiah had feared the Lord from his youth (I Kings 18:12). This is also the testimony of the sacred historian concerning him: "**Obadiah feared the Lord greatly**" (ver. 3).

And he had given conspicuous proof of his piety; for when Jezebel had swept the land with the besom of persecution, hunting down the prophets of the Lord, and consigning them to indiscriminate slaughter, he had rescued a hundred of the proscribed men, hiding them by fifty in a cave, and had fed them with bread and water. But though a good man, there was evidently a great lack of moral strength, of backbone, of vigorous life, in his character; otherwise he could never have held the position he did in the court of Ahab and Jezebel.

There is no possible harm in a Christian man holding a position of influence in a court or society where he can do so at no cost of principle. On the contrary, it may enable him to render priceless service to the cause of God. Where would Luther and the Reformation have been, humanly speaking, had it not been for the Elector of Saxony? And what would have been the fate of our Wycliffe, if John o' Gaunt had not constituted him his ward? But very few can occupy such a position, without putting kid on their hands and velvet on their lips; without dropping something of their uncompromising speech, or dipping their colors to the flag of expediency. And there is every indication that this was the weak point with Obadiah.

Obadiah did not believe in carrying matters too far. Of course, he could not fall in with this new order of things; but then there was no need for him to force his religious notions on everyone.

He was often shocked at what he saw at court, and found it hard to keep still; but then it was no business of his; and it would not do to throw up his situation, for he would be sure to lose it if he spoke out. He was often sad at heart to witness the sufferings of the prophets of the Lord, and half inclined to take up their cause; but then a single man could not do much, and he could, perhaps, help them better in a quiet way by keeping where he was, though it might sometimes be a little strain on his principles.

The poor man must often have been in a great strait to reconcile his duty to the Lord with his duty to his other master, Ahab. And Elijah shrewdly hinted at it, when he said, "**Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here!**"

Imagine a courtier of Oliver Cromwell trying to be true to the Commonwealth, and to the cause of the exiled Stuarts! The life of policy and expediency is a species of rope-walking - it needs considerable practice in the art of balancing. There are scores of Obadiah's everywhere around us, and in the professing church.

- They know the right, and are secretly trying to do it; but they say as little about religion as they can.
- They never rebuke sin.
- They never confess their true colors.
- They find pretexts and excuses to satisfy the remonstrances of an uneasy conscience.
- They are as nervous of being identified by declared Christians as Obadiah was when Elijah sent him to Ahab.
- They are sorry for those who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake; but it never occurs to them to stand in the pillory by their side.
- They content themselves with administering some little relief to them, as Obadiah did to the harried prophets; and, whilst they conceal that relief from the world, they put it in as a claim to the people of God for recognition and protection, as Obadiah did. "**Was it not told my lord what I did?**" (I Kings 18:13).
- They sometimes are on the point of throwing up all to take up an uncompromising attitude; but they find it hard to go forth to suffer affliction with the people of God, so long as they are well provided for within the palace walls.

What a contrast between Obadiah and Elijah!

And it is with the purpose of accentuating that contrast, and of bringing out into fuller relief the noble character of the prophet, that we have sought to elaborate this sketch of Ahab's steward.

## **I. THERE IS A CONTRAST BETWEEN THE INSIDE AND THE OUTSIDE OF THE CAMP FOR WITNESS-BEARING**

There is much said on both sides of the case. Many amongst us advise that the children of God should stay in the camp of the world - joining in its festivities; going to its places of amusements; taking the lead in its fashion and its course. In this way they hope to temper and steady it; to level it up; to make it Christian.

It is a fair dream, exceedingly congenial to our natural tastes; and if it were only true, it would save a world of trouble.

The poor prophets of the Lord might come back from their caves; Elijah might become Ahab's vizier; and Obadiah's conscience might settle to rest. Indeed, Elijah's policy would be a supreme mistake; and we had better all become Obadiah's at once.

But there are two insurmountable difficulties in the way of our accepting this theory of leveling up from within.

(1) *It is in direct opposition to the teaching of Scripture.*

“**Come out from her, my people,**” is the one summons that rings like a clarion note from board to board. “**Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord; and touch not the unclean thing.**” There is not a single hero or saint, whose name sparkles on the inspired page, who moved his times from within: all, without exception, have raised the cry, “**Let us go forth without the camp;**” and have joined the constant stream of martyrs, confessors, prophets, and saints, of whom the world is not worthy, but who can trace their kinship to Him of whom it is written, “**He suffered without the gate.**”

The only Scriptural course for God’s witness-bearers is to go out to Him without the camp; in the world, but not of it; wearing the pilgrim garb, manifesting the pilgrim spirit, uttering the pilgrim confession.

*(2) This theory will not work.*

The man who goes into the world to level it up will soon find himself leveled down. Was not this the case with Obadiah? Instead of getting Ahab to think with himself, Ahab sent him unto all fountains of water and unto all brooks, to find grass for his horses and mules. Surely this was a miserable errand for one who feared the Lord greatly! But this is only a sample of the kind of things which must be borne and done by such as try to serve two masters.

Compare the influence exerted on the behalf of Sodom by Abraham, on the heights of Mamre, with that of Lot, who, not content with pitching his tent toward the city gate, went to live inside, and even became one of the aldermen of the place (Genesis 19:1). Remember that Lot was carried captive in the sack of Sodom; but Abraham rescued him. But why need we multiply instances? This matter is undergoing daily proof.

- The Christian woman who marries an ungodly man is in imminent danger of being soon dragged down to his level.
- The servant of God who enters into partnership with a man of the world cannot keep the business from drifting.
- The church which admits the world into its circle will find that it will get worldly quicker than the world will become Christian.

The safest and strongest position is outside the camp.

Archimedes said that he could move the world, if only he had a point of rest given him outside it. Thus, too, can a handful of God’s servants influence their times, if only they resemble Elijah, whose life was spent altogether outside the pale of the court and the world of his time.

## **II. THERE IS A CONTRAST BETWEEN PREVENTIVE AND AGGRESSIVE GOODNESS**

Obadiah sought simply to prevent a great harm being done. He shielded the prophets from the sword of Jezebel, and from the touch of famine.

And this was well. Preventive goodness like this serves a very useful purpose. It rears Homes, and Refuges, and bulwarks of defense, behind which persecuted and threatened lives may thrive. But, after all, the world needs something more. It is not enough to deal with the poisoned streams; a hand is needed to cast the healing salt into the fountain-head. There is an urgent demand for men like Elijah and John the Baptist, who dare oppose the perpetrators of evil deeds, and arraign them before the bar of God, and compel them to bow before the offended majesty of a broken law.

For this there is needed a positive endowment of power, which cannot be had by the half-hearted; but is the glad prerogative of those who, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, are servants of God. Obadiah had no power of this kind. How could he have? On the other hand, Elijah was full of it; and, because he was so, he succeeded in arresting the tides of sin when they were in full flood.

It is not enough to shelter the prophets; we must go and show ourselves to Ahab. We may be as sugar; but we must also be like salt, that stays the progress of consumption. The preventive and ameliorative, the healing agencies, are good; but the aggressive are better still, because they deal with the hidden causes of things. May God send to His Church a handful of lion-like men, like Elijah, of whom this is the majestic record: "**Elijah went to show himself unto Ahab;**" to confront the royal culprit, to lay the king under arrest.

### **III. THERE IS A CONTRAST BETWEEN THE CAUTION OF EXPEDIENCY AND THE FEARLESSNESS OF FAITH**

When Elijah told Obadiah to tell his master that he was awaiting him, the astonished courtier was incredulous. He knew how irritated and incensed Ahab had been, and that his anger was at white heat still; and it seemed madness for the prophet to expose himself to its flames. Indeed, he thought either that the prophet did not know the way in which the king had sought for him, or that the Spirit of the Lord would carry him off before they could meet. It never occurred to him that Elijah dare meet the king if he really knew how matters stood. And even supposing that he were foolhardy enough to adventure himself, surely God would prevent him from stepping into the lion's lair. In any case, he wished to have nothing to do with it. He was more anxious for himself than for the work of God, or the wishes of Elijah. Twice over he repeated the words, "**He shall slay me.**" And it was only when Elijah appealed to God as the witness of his solemn oath, and assured him that he would surely show himself to Ahab ere the sun went down, that he reluctantly went to meet Ahab, and told him. How unable he was to form a true conception of the fearlessness of Elijah!

And what was the source of that fearlessness? Surely it is unfolded to us in the words of Elijah's sublime asseveration: "**The Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand,**" God was more real to Elijah than Ahab. He was a courtier in the throne-room of the King of kings. How could he be afraid of a man that should die, and of the son of man that should become as the grass of the mower's scythe withered by the noontide heat?

The fear of God had made him impervious to all other fear. Faith sees the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire.

Faith can hear the tread of twelve legions of angels marshaling for its defense. Faith can detect the outlines of those Almighty hands which hide the children of God in their hollow. And so, with unblanched face and undismayed heart, God's Elijahs go on to do His commands, though their way is blocked by as many devils as there are tiles upon the housetops. The Obadiahs assert that they will never dare to carry their proposals through; but they live to see their predictions falsified and their mean suggestions shamed.

#### **IV. THERE IS A CONTRAST BETWEEN THE RECEPTION GIVEN TO THESE TWO TYPES OF CHARACTER BY THE UNGODLY**

Ahab could tolerate Obadiah, because he never rebuked him. When salt has lost its savor it does not sting, though it be rubbed into an open wound. But as soon as Ahab saw Elijah, he accosted him as the great troubler of the time. **“And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel?”** (I Kings 18:17).

Years after, speaking of another devoted servant of God, whose advice was demanded by Jehoshaphat, this same Ahab said, **“I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.”** There is no higher testimony to the consistency of our life than the hearty hatred of the Ahabs around us. One of the most scathing condemnations that could be pronounced on men is contained in those terrible words of our Lord: **“The world cannot hate you; but Me it hateth, because I testify of it that the works thereof are evil.”** Who would not undergo all the hate that the Ahabs can heap on us, rather than incur that sentence from the lips of Christ! **“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad.”** If all men speak well of you, you may begin to question whether you are not becoming mere Obadiahs. But if Ahab accuses you of troubling him, rejoice; and tell him to his face that his trouble is due to a broken commandment, and to the idols before which he bows. If there should read these lines those who are in trouble, enduring affliction, their life smitten with drought, let them ask whether the cause is not to be found in broken vows, in desecrated temples, in forfeited oaths. If so, return at once, with tears of penitence and words of confession, unto the Lord. **“He hath torn, and He will heal; He hath smitten, and He will bind up.”**

There, face to face, we leave Ahab and Elijah. We need not ask which is the more royal of the two; nor need we spend our time in looking for Obadiah. We cannot but admire the noble bearing of the prophet of God. But let us remember it was due, not to his inherent character, but to his faith. **“By faith he quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness was made strong, stopped the mouth of this lion.”** And if we will acquire a similar faith, we may anticipate similar results on the meaner platform of our own lives.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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