FIRST KINGS

Chapter 18

***Elijah and Obadiah***

**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.” 2 So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria, 3 and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of his palace. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord. 4 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.) 5 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.” 6 So they divided the land they were to cover, Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another. 7 As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, “Is it really you, my lord Elijah?” 8 “Yes,” he replied. “Go tell your master, ‘Elijah is here.’ ” 9 “What have I done wrong,” asked Obadiah, “that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? 10 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. 11 But now you tell me to go to my master and say, ‘Elijah is here.’ 12 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 worshiped the Lord since my youth. 13 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. 14 And now you tell me to go to my master and say, ‘Elijah is here.’ He will kill me!” 15 Elijah said, “As the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today.”**

**18:1** *third year.* Apparently of the drought. Later Jewish tradition indicates that the drought lasted three and a half years (cf. Lk 4:25; Jas 5:17), but that probably represents a symbolic number for a drought cut short (half of seven years; see Ge 41:27; 2Ki 8:1). (CSB)

*present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.* Elijah’s return is not occasioned by repentance in Israel but by the command of the Lord, who in his sovereign grace determined to reveal himself anew to his people. (CSB)

**18:3** *Obadiah.* A common OT name, meaning “servant of the Lord.” (CSB)

*in charge of his palace.* See note on 4:6. (CSB)

**18:5** The famine did not move Ahab to repentance (contrast Ahab’s response to the famine with that of David years earlier, 2Sa 21:1). But when his military strength seemed to be jeopardized, he scoured the land for food and water (see 10:26; according to the annals of the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser III, Ahab had a force of at least 2,000 chariots). (CSB)

**18:8** *tell your master, ‘Elijah is here.’* This action would publicly identify Obadiah with Elijah in contrast to his previous clandestine support of the prophets sought by Jezebel (see vv. 4, 13). (CSB)

**18:12** *I don’t know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you.* Elijah’s disappearance earlier and now his sudden reappearance suggested to Obadiah that God’s Spirit was miraculously transporting the prophet about (see 2Ki 2:16). (CSB)

**18:13** *Jezebel was killing the prophets.* Possibly in an attempt to please Baal so he would send rain. (CSB)

*prophets of the Lord*. Probably members of the communities of “prophets” that had sprung up in Israel during this time of apostasy (see note on 20:35). (CSB)

***Elijah on Mount Carmel***

**16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. 17 When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” 18 “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals. 19 Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” 20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing. 22 Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. 23 Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 24 Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.” 25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” 26 So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “O Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. 27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” 28 So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. 29 Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. 30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which was in ruins. 31 Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” 32 With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. 33 He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.” 34 “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. 35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. 36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” 38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. 39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!” 40 Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. 41 And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” 42 So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. 43 “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” 44 The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’ ” 45 Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. 46 The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.**

**18:17** *you troubler of Israel.* Ahab holds Elijah to account for the drought and charges him with a crime against the state worthy of death (he calls him a “trouble bringer”; see Jos 7:25). (CSB)

**18:18** *You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals.* The source of Israel’s trouble was not Elijah or even the drought, but the breach of covenantal loyalty. (CSB)

**18:19** *Mount Carmel.* A high ridge next to the Mediterranean Sea, where the effects of the drought would be least apparent (see Am 1:2) and the power of Baal to nurture life would seem to be strongest. (CSB)

*prophets of Baal … prophets of Asherah.* See v. 29 and note. (CSB)

*Asherah.* See note on 14:15. (CSB)

*eat at Jezebel’s table.* See note on 2:7. (CSB)

**18:21** *waver.* The Hebrew for this word is the same as that used for “danced” in v. 26 (see note there). Elijah speaks with biting irony: In her religious ambivalence Israel is but engaging in a wild and futile religious “dance.” (CSB)

*If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.* Elijah placed a clear choice before the people. He drew a sharp contrast between the worship of the Lord and that of Baal, to eliminate the apostate idea that both deities could be worshiped in a syncretistic way. (CSB)

**18:22** *only one … left.* At least the only one to stand boldly and publicly against the king and the prophets of Baal (but see v. 4; 19:10, 14; 20:13, 28, 35; 22:6, 8). (CSB)

**18:24** *The god who answers by fire—he is God.* Both the Lord and Baal were said to ride the thunderstorm as their divine chariot (see Ps 104:3 and note); thunder was their voice (see Ps 29:3–9 and note) and lightning their weapon (see Ps 18:14 and note). Elijah’s challenge is direct. Cf. Lev 9:24. (CSB)

**18:26** *danced around the altar.* The ecstatic cultic dance was part of the pagan ritual intended to arouse the deity to perform some desired action. (CSB)

**18:27** *deep in thought … sleeping.* Elijah ridicules, but as he does he shows knowledge of the Baal myths. (CSB)

*until their blood flowed.* Self-inflicted wounds (causing blood to flow) were symbolic of self-sacrifice as an extreme method of arousing the deity to action. Such mutilation of the body was strictly forbidden in the Mosaic law (Lev 19:28; Dt 14:1). (CSB)

**18:29** *frantic prophesying.* Indicative of ecstatic raving, in which the ritual reached its climax (see notes on 1Sa 10:5; 18:10). (CSB)

*time for the evening sacrifice.* See Ex 29:38–41; Nu 28:3–8. (CSB)

*no response.* Dramatic demonstration of Baal’s impotence (see Ps 115:5–8; 135:15–18; Jer 10:5). (CSB)

**18:30** *altar of the Lord, which was in ruins.* It is possible that the altar had been built by people of the northern ten tribes after the division of the kingdom (see note on 3:2) and that it had been destroyed by the agents of Jezebel (vv. 4, 13; 19:10, 14). (CSB)

**18:31** *twelve stones, one for each of the tribes.* In this way Elijah called attention to the covenant unity of Israel as the people of God in spite of her political division. What was about to happen concerned the entire nation, not just the northern ten tribes. (CSB)

**18:33** *water.* By drenching the whole installation Elijah showed to all that he was using no tricks. (CSB)

**18:36** *prayed.* Elijah’s simple but earnest prayer stands in sharp contrast to the frantic shouts and “dancing” and self-mutilation of the Baal prophets. (CSB)

*God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel.* An appeal to the Lord to remember his ancient covenant with the patriarchs, and to Israel to remember all that the Lord has done for her since the days of her forefathers. (CSB)

**18:38** *fire of the Lord fell.* See note on v. 24. (CSB)

**18:40** *slaughtered there.* Elijah, acting on the authority of the Lord, who sent him, carried out the sentence pronounced in the Mosaic law for prophets of pagan deities (Dt 13:13–18; 17:2–5). (CSB)

**18:41** *sound of a heavy rain.* Now that Baal worship has been struck a devastating blow, there is the promise of rain (see 17:1). Significantly, Ahab takes no action—either to carry out the Mosaic sentence or to halt Elijah. (CSB)

**18:42** *Elijah … bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.* Now that the people had confessed that the Lord alone was God, Elijah prayed for the covenant curse to be lifted (see note on 17:1) by the coming of rain (see 8:35; 2Ch 7:13–14). (CSB)

**18:43** *Seven times.* The number symbolic of completeness. (CSB)

**18:44** *rising from the sea.* Appearing on the western horizon. (CSB)

**18:46** *ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.* Divinely energized by extraordinary strength, Elijah ran before Ahab’s chariot to Jezreel. This dramatic scene, with the Lord’s prophet running before the king and the Lord himself racing behind him riding his mighty thundercloud chariot (see note on v. 24), served as a powerful appeal to Ahab to break once for all with Baal and henceforth to rule as the servant of the Lord. (CSB)