

March 28  
Lesson 4 (NIV)

## PROPHET OF COURAGE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 19:28–39

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 18–19;  
Matthew 17:1–13

### 1 KINGS 18:5–18

**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.”

**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.”



Photo: Getty Images

## KEY VERSE

*“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.”* —**1 Kings 18:18**

## PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD’S COVENANT

### Unit 1: Faithful Prophets

LESSONS 1–4

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Tell what happened during the meetings between Elijah and Obadiah, then between Elijah and Ahab.
2. Explain a purpose of a prophet’s ministry as it confronted the righteous and the wicked.
3. Write a message of encouragement to someone whose ministry requires a special measure of courage.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. The Source of Courage
- B. Lesson Context

- I. Ahab and Obadiah (1 Kings 18:5–6)

- A. Surviving a Famine (v. 5)
- B. Surveying the Land (v. 6)

- II. Elijah and Obadiah (1 Kings 18:7–15)

- A. Unexpected Meeting (v. 7)
- B. Unwelcome Order (vv. 8–14)  
*Wanted!*

- C. Unwavering Promise (v. 15)

- III. Elijah and Ahab (1 Kings 18:16–18)

- A. Antagonistic Reception (vv. 16–17)  
*Projection*
- B. Honest Answer (v. 18)

### Conclusion

- A. Who’s the Troublemaker?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## HOW TO SAY IT

Ahab     *Ay-hab.*

Baal     *Bay-ul.*

Bethel   *Beth-ul.*

Elijah	Ee-lye-juh.
Jeroboam	Jair-uh-boe-um.
Jezebel	Jez-uh-bel.
Kerith	Key-rith.
Obadiah	O-buh-dye-uh.
Sidon	Sigh-dun.
Zarephath	Zair-uh-fath.

## Introduction

### A. The Source of Courage

During my ministry with a church in Cincinnati, I visited almost weekly an older lady in the congregation. She resided in a nursing care facility. On entering the driveway of the building, one noticed a sign that usually featured some kind of clever saying. For about a month, the sign read “Inhale courage, exhale fear.” Every time I saw that sign, I thought, “If only it were that easy—to receive courage by simply breathing in and lose one’s fears by breathing out.”

In the classic movie *The Wizard of Oz*, all the cowardly lion had to do to find the courage he wanted was to receive a medal from the wizard. It was inscribed with the word *Courage*. Again, if only it were that easy.

Some of the most courageous individuals anyone could ever encounter are the prophets of the Old Testament. One of these is highlighted in today’s lesson. He is Elijah, a man who was used by God to confront one of Israel’s most wicked kings, Ahab, and his ruthless wife, Jezebel. The times demanded someone who would not back down in the

face of brazen defiance of the true God of Israel, and Elijah was that man. He did not receive his courage from a medal; his “mettle” came from the Lord himself.

### B. Lesson Context

Today’s Scripture covers the early portion of the ministry of the prophet Elijah (who prophesied about 869 to 838 BC). He proclaimed the word of the Lord during one of the most critical periods of Old Testament history. His ministry began after the split of the nation into two kingdoms (931 BC): Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom).

The first king of the north, Jeroboam I (931–910 BC), began his reign by violating the first two of the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20:3–4](#)). He set up two golden calves for the people to worship: one in the northern part of the northern kingdom, in Dan, and one in the southern part, in Bethel ([1 Kings 12:28–29](#)). This made it easier for those in the north to embrace pagan worship.

The reign of King Ahab in northern Israel (874–853 BC) was characterized by economic prosperity, at least at the outset ([1 Kings 22:39](#); compare [2 Chronicles 18:1](#)). It was also a time of spiritual poverty ([1 Kings 18:17–40](#)). Idol worship became more prevalent when Ahab married Jezebel. She was the daughter of the king of Sidon and a devout worshipper of the god Baal ([1 Kings 16:31](#); [18:3](#), [19](#)). Baal was a fertility god, believed to be in control of anything to do with giving life, whether to animals, plants,

or human beings.

**First Kings 17** begins with the sudden appearance of Elijah. He boldly proclaimed that “there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word” (17:1). Moses had warned God’s people of the abomination that idolatry constituted in the sight of God (**Deuteronomy 4:15–24**). Famine was listed among the curses that would result from disobeying God’s law (28:23–24; compare **Leviticus 26:19–20**). A declaration of famine amounted to a grave insult to Baal (and to Ahab and Jezebel) and constituted a direct challenge to the authority of that fictitious god.

Following this announcement of a famine, Elijah went into hiding for a time. The prophet hid by the brook Kerith (until the brook dried up), then traveled northward to Zarephath of Sidon (Jezebel’s homeland!). There he stayed with a widow, for whom he offered two unforgettable demonstrations of God’s power. First, her supply of oil and flour to prepare bread for her household did not run out during the famine; and second, her son was raised from the dead (**1 Kings 17:8–24**). Both miracles revealed the Lord’s authority in matters of fertility, where Baal was believed to be in control.

Following this time away from the northern kingdom, Elijah was spiritually prepared to speak and demonstrate the Lord’s authoritative word. He could return to Ahab’s realm and confront the defiant, disobedient king.

## I. Ahab and Obadiah

(1 KINGS 18:5–6)

### A. Surviving a Famine (v. 5)

**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.”**

The name *Obadiah* is used of some 12 different men in the Old Testament, in addition to the book of the same name. This particular man is first mentioned in the biblical record in **1 Kings 18:3**, where he is described as Ahab’s “palace administrator.” This likely means that Obadiah was in charge of Ahab’s palace in Samaria (capital of the northern kingdom of Israel) and assisted in the administration of official matters.

Obadiah was a man of remarkable courage, given the position he held and the faith he embraced. He is described as someone who “was a devout believer in the Lord” (**1 Kings 18:3**). His faith was not a private matter. But he must have been careful in how he exercised it, given the devotion of Ahab and Jezebel to Baal (see **18:13**, below).

*Horses and mules* were necessary for transportation and carrying loads. It is worth noting that *Ahab* did not express concern for people who were suffering or dying during the famine. Perhaps he was preoccupied with keeping his army supplied with animals necessary for military preparedness. The situation in the kingdom had become so desperate that the king and one of his chief officials, not the usual workers, were tasked with finding sustenance for the

animals.

### B. Surveying the Land (v. 6)

**6. So they divided the land they were to cover, Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another.**

*Ahab* realized how difficult it would be for one man to cover that extent of territory. He proceeded to divide the northern kingdom between the two of them. The hope was that they would find enough grazing area to keep their livestock alive.

## II. Elijah and Obadiah

(1 KINGS 18:7–15)

### A. Unexpected Meeting (v. 7)

**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?”**

*Elijah* probably would have been traveling south from Sidon, where the prophet had been helping the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8–24). It is likely that *Obadiah* was traveling through the northern part of Israel when the two men *met*.

Obadiah’s question reflects some measure of doubt that this was *really* Elijah, or disbelief that he was seeing Elijah at all. Addressing Elijah as *my lord* reflected the reverence with which Obadiah held the prophet as God’s messenger. The title did not imply deity.

### B. Unwelcome Order (vv. 8–14)

**8. “Yes,” he replied. “Go tell your master, ‘Elijah is here.’”**

*Elijah* confirmed that he himself was speaking to Obadiah as part of a command to return to Ahab. Although Obadiah had called Elijah “lord,” Elijah implied that Obadiah had actually been honoring and serving his *master* Ahab. This may have been a subtle dig or an outright test of Obadiah.

**9. “What have I done wrong,” asked Obadiah, “that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death?”**

Obadiah assumed that if Elijah were asking him to put his life in such jeopardy, it must be to punish him for a particular sin he had committed (compare 1 Kings 18:12, below). Obadiah’s thinking was similar to that of the widow in Zarephath, who accused Elijah of punishing her sin by taking her son from her (17:18). Calling himself Elijah’s *servant* rejects the idea that *Ahab* had Obadiah’s true allegiance. Thus Obadiah distanced himself from any implied sin, especially of idolatry, that could result from serving Ahab in any capacity.

Obadiah anticipated Ahab’s reaction to Elijah’s message. For Obadiah to leave Elijah alone in order to travel to Ahab (we do not know how far apart the two men were at this point) would anger the king, who had already stood by as his wife killed God’s prophets (see 1 Kings 18:13). Would Ahab suspect that Obadiah was a supporter of Elijah and a worshipper of Elijah’s God?

*What Do You Think?*

How can you improve your reputation of

being a tactful person in your spheres of influence?

*Digging Deeper*

How does [Daniel 2:14](#) in its context help frame your response?

**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.**

In contrast to the prophet who feared this task would leave him dead, *the Lord ... lives* (see [1 Kings 18:15](#), below). The promises of Obadiah and Elijah were made before God. This marks both men as true prophets. They served the living God, not idols or fictitious, powerless gods (see [18:26–29](#), not in our printed text).

We need not assume that there was literally *not a nation or kingdom* that Ahab didn't questioned about Elijah's whereabouts. Rather, Obadiah described (using hyperbole) how intensely Ahab had been searching for the prophet. The rulers in Sidon probably had not realized that Elijah had been among them ([1 Kings 17:9](#)). Had they been, they would have risked Ahab's wrath by lying under *oath* that they had not seen the prophet.

**WANTED!**

“East Area Rapist” and “Golden State Killer” are names for the criminal who killed at least 13 people, raped more than 50, and

brought fear to many others in California between 1974 and 1986. For years, law enforcement followed every lead available, but the case grew cold.

The manhunt came back to life in 2018, when a distant relative uploaded his own DNA profile onto an open-source genealogy website. This eventually led the police to a man in his 70s who had resided in the areas where the crimes had been committed. His DNA was a match to DNA found at various crime scenes, and the suspect was arrested.

Obadiah may have been exaggerating when he told Elijah that Ahab had sent out searchers to *every* nation. But it tells us that Ahab's search for Elijah was just as tenacious as the search for the Golden State Killer. What does the intensity of your search for Jesus say about you?

—C. R. B.

**11–12a. “But now you tell me to go to my master and say, ‘Elijah is here.’ 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.**

If Ahab heard from Obadiah that he had met *Elijah* without arresting him, the king would be infuriated. The implication of not immediately bringing Elijah to Ahab would be that Obadiah was lying to the king—something that one just did not do!

The tone of the verse and half-verse before us indicates that Obadiah considered what he had to say next to be a foregone conclusion. In his own estimation, Obadiah

would pay with his life when the Spirit whisked Elijah away. We often think of the Spirit's work in the prophets' lives in terms of their speech and writing (example: [2 Peter 1:20–21](#)). However, Obadiah was more concerned with the Spirit's ability to move or hide a person supernaturally, as he had done with Enoch ([Genesis 5:24](#); compare [2 Kings 2:16b](#); [Ezekiel 8:3](#); [Acts 8:39](#)).

Obadiah knew something of how prophets of the Lord operated in obedience to him ([Deuteronomy 18:15–22](#); see lesson 1). Though Elijah intended to appear before Ahab, it would only happen if God allowed it. In fact, God had commanded it ([1 Kings 18:1–2](#), not in our printed text).

#### *What Do You Think?*

How do a person put the brakes on his or her imagination to keep it from running wild and paralyzing action?

#### *Digging Deeper*

When was a time that fear of a hypothetical outcome stopped you in your tracks?

**12b–13. “Yet I your servant have worshiped the LORD since my youth. 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.**

Obadiah began a defense of his personal character and devotion to the Lord as a reason why his life should not be put in danger. He had lived up to the meaning of his name,

“servant of the Lord.” In fact, he'd grown up from his youth fearing God, a sign of wisdom ([Psalm 111:10](#); [Proverbs 1:7](#)).

Obadiah's actions on behalf of the Lord's prophets were evidence that he feared the Lord. Some prophets already had been put to death under Jezebel's direction, but we have no idea of how many. Obadiah's hiding a hundred ... in two caves and smuggling in supplies for them was indeed a dangerous task (see [1 Kings 18:4](#)). Not only did he have to be very sneaky with large amounts of food and water, but chances of discovery were heightened during that time of drought and the famine it produced.

**14. “And now you tell me to go to my master and say, ‘Elijah is here.’ He will kill me!”**

Obadiah repeated [1 Kings 18:12a](#) to emphasize the danger that Elijah was putting him in.

#### *What Do You Think?*

Considering anew the question “Under what circumstances in the church should you act as a messenger between two parties?” on p. 251, how does today's text modify your thought?

#### *Digging Deeper*

What did you learn from a time you made a wrong choice in this regard?

### C. Unwavering Promise (v. 15)

**15. Elijah said, “As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today.”**

Elijah's first recorded prophecy that neither dew nor rain would fall on Israel opened with a similar oath (1 Kings 17:1). The oath at hand was as trustworthy as any promise could ever be. In it, Elijah expanded on Obadiah's oath (18:10, above): not only does God live, but he is *the Lord Almighty*. This is a warrior image of God, leading the heavenly angels in battle against evil. The title called Obadiah's attention to God's power, not just his presence.

The additional words *whom I serve* indicated the close relationship between the Lord and Elijah (compare Jeremiah 15:1). As the Lord's spokesman, Elijah stood ready to go, speak, and do whatever his commander desired.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some ways Christians can reassure one another in times of fear or doubt?

#### *Digging Deeper*

In what ways, if ever, is 2 Kings 6:13–17 a precedent for offering such reassurance?

### III. Elijah and Ahab (1 KINGS 18:16–18)

#### A. Antagonistic Reception (vv. 16–17)

**16. So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah.**

Elijah's word and oath satisfied *Obadiah* and settled any doubts he may have had about returning without the prophet *Elijah*

by his side. This would be the first time King *Ahab* and Elijah met face-to-face following the three-and-a-half-year famine that had devastated the entire northern kingdom of Israel.

**17. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"**

Ahab's greeting on seeing *Elijah* was the very opposite of Obadiah's (see 1 Kings 18:7, above). Ahab's words reflect the utter contempt in which he held prophets like Elijah. This disdain was based on the bad reports prophets frequently brought him (example: 22:8).

But in a sense, Ahab was right. Any true prophet of the Lord will trouble people when he or she confronts them with the truth about their sinfulness and their need to repent. Ahab was justified in accusing Elijah of being the cause of the famine of the past three and a half years (James 5:17). However, his larger point is way off the mark. God's judgment would not have occurred had *Israel* remained faithful to the Lord alone (see 1 Kings 18:18, below).

#### **PROJECTION**

I had used my father's old Kodak a number of times when one day I suddenly realized that I wanted to be a photographer. I was "seeing pictures" as I looked at the world. Soon, I bought a 35mm camera that served me well as I learned my new craft. I liked taking color slides that could be projected onto a screen many times the size of that small piece of film.



My current camera is essentially a computer with a lens attached. Nevertheless, I still view my pictures by projection: captured on the camera's tiny electronic sensor, they are projected onto my computer screen. A video projector can make the picture big enough for a large auditorium.

In criticizing others, we may “project” onto them our own faults, making them appear larger in that other person. When Ahab condemned Elijah as bringing trouble to Israel, the king was projecting his own spiritual failings onto the prophet. How can you ensure that you do not project your own sins and shortcomings on others?

—C. R. B.

## B. Honest Answer (v. 18)

**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.”**

Elijah did not back down in the face of the king’s anger. He threw Ahab’s accusation back at him, letting him know that the king and the idolatry of his *father’s family* were the real troublemakers in Israel.

The famine had come upon the land because of the idolatrous practices that had first been encouraged by Ahab’s father, Omri (1 Kings 16:25–26; see Lesson Context). These practices were furthered through Ahab’s efforts in promoting the worship of Baal (16:30–33), with the enthusiastic support of Jezebel (21:25–26).

You may have noticed that older versions of the Bible have the term “Baalim” instead of “Baals” as we see here. English usually forms the plural by adding an “s” on the end of a noun; Hebrew forms the plural by adding “im.” Hence, both Baalim and *Baals* are plural forms of *Baal*. The plural form occurs about 18 times in the Old Testament. The word means “lord” or “possessor,” and the plural may refer to different manifestations of this so-called god.

### *What Do You Think?*

When condemned or mocked for following God’s Word, how should you respond?

### *Digging Deeper*

Should your response be the same in all situations? Why, or why not?

Not long after Ahab and Elijah’s meeting, both the king and the people saw a clear demonstration of the impotence of idolatry and the power of Elijah’s God at the contest on Mount Carmel. Even that, however, did not convince Ahab to change his evil practices and renounce his idolatry (1 Kings 18:20–40, not in our printed text). Though he repented late in life (21:27), Ahab is still remembered primarily for all the trouble he caused Israel.

## Conclusion

### A. Who’s the Troublemaker?

Courage has always been the trademark

of God’s spokespeople (examples: [Joshua 1:6–7, 9, 18](#); [Amos 7:10–17](#)). Like Elijah, these prophets continued to proclaim courageously and lead faithfully according to the Lord’s words. And like Elijah, these prophets were considered troublemakers.

In many parts of the world today, an increased measure of courage is required to preach and teach the gospel. Defiant authorities in countries like China or Sudan consider followers of Jesus to be modern troublemakers. Such leaders work hard to silence missionary voices. In India, Christian ministers have been beaten by Hindu radicals. The country of Turkey has displaced Christians searching for a place of worship. And all over the world, Christian refugees seek new homes in nations that will welcome them in peace. (Do an internet search for “the 10 most dangerous places to be a Christian.”)



Visual for Lesson 4. While discussing verse 17, have the class brainstorm situations in which they could be called trouble for speaking for God.

Let us pray for these faithful servants of the Lord, that they may be restored,

strengthened, settled ([1 Peter 5:10](#)), and empowered with the courage that has always characterized God’s people in an often hostile world. May we learn from the examples of courage of our ancient prophets and our fellow Christians in the world today.

## B. Prayer

Father, empower us with courage to live out our faith and speak your word on your behalf. We pray for our fellow believers in other lands where living for you means putting their lives on the line daily. May they respond with Holy Spirit-empowered courage to the challenges they face. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## C. Thought to Remember

Be a courageous, Spirit-led troublemaker!

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

## Into the Lesson

*Option.* Place at chairs copies of the “Profiles in Courage” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Do not say anything about the exercise; merely shrug your shoulders when asked any question

about it.

After mysteriously ignoring the previous exercise (if you used it), write the word *courage* on the board vertically as the start of a whole-class acrostic exercise. Invite learners to call out single-word qualities they associate with courage. Mention three rules at the outset: (1) the word called out must have a letter in common with the word *courage*, (2) the letter in common must not have been taken by a previous call-out, and (3) no one is allowed to voice a second word until everyone has had a chance to voice one.

Write called-out words horizontally on the board, ensuring that they intersect with *courage* at the letter in common. The exercise ends when seven intersecting words are written. The finished product should look something like this, but with words your learners have voiced:

deCisive  
Optimistic  
Unflappable  
motivatoR  
articulAte  
orGanized  
focusEd

After you've written the seven words, take a vote as to which word of the seven best describes courage. Then make a transition by saying, "It will be interesting to see how well your chosen word and the other six fit with the two examples of courage in today's lesson."

## Into the Word

Set the stage for Bible study by asking a learner in advance to prepare a three-minute summary of the Lesson Context to be delivered at this time. Then give each learner a handout (you prepare) that features two columns intersected by four rows. The two column headings are *Obadiah* and *Elijah*; label the four rows down the left as follows:

- 1—What God called him to do
- 2—How he responded to God's call
- 3—Why God's call required courage
- 4—I personally identify with him because ...

Ask learners, in groups of three to six, to complete the top six of the eight intersections, using today's text. The bottom two intersections are then completed individually in a minute of private reflection. Discuss results in ensuing whole-class discussion. Allow volunteers to voice their "I personally identify" entries, but don't put anyone on the spot to do so. (*Option:* To extend this study, distribute copies of the "A Tale of Three Men" exercise from the activity page for groups to complete as indicated; follow with whole-class discussion.)

## Into Life

Make prior arrangements for one of these three presentations to occur at this point:

- a learner reports on persecuted Christians
- you share examples from the work of a missionary supported by your congregation

- a member of your church staff or missions committee brings that report

Ask class members to consider taking time this week to write notes of encouragement to persecuted Christians to gain courage from the Lord. Distribute names and addresses of possibilities for this, which you've researched in advance.

*Option.* Distribute copies of the "My Prayer for Courage" exercise from the activity page. Give individuals one minute to jot down ideas, and then ask volunteers to share what they've written.

Return to the words learners chose in the opening acrostic. Pose these questions: Which word best fits Obadiah? Elijah? Which word is most necessary for persecuted Christians? Why?