

“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – OBADIAH”

Obadiah 1-21

Do you ever get into situations where you have committed yourself to something, then really wish you hadn't? When you actually come to do it, the task seems quite hopeless. Well, we said we'd have a look at these little books of prophecy towards the end of the Old Testament for a few weeks – the so-called “Minor Prophets” – and Oliver started the series over the last couple of weeks with *Joel* and *Amos*. This morning we light upon the little book of *Obadiah*. What on earth is there to say about this, now I've got to come up with a sermon on it? The temptation is to leave it out and hope no-one notices – and I suspect the majority of people wouldn't actually notice! Alas, in this congregation there are several retired ministers, a few people with Biblical studies degrees and one or two of you who know your way around the contents page of your Bibles, so at least one of you would have spotted it, I'm sure: so here we are.

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament and, as far as its message goes, probably the most obscure. We know nothing at all about the author, apart from his name – no details about his father or where he lived. The historical background is completely taken up with a local feud between two very minor nations in Ancient West Asia around two and half millennia ago. There doesn't appear to be anything that points forward to the message of the New Testament. It's all couched in the language of war, revenge and disaster. And there's not even a story to it which might help us to make sense of it, as with, for example, the book of *Jonah* which we'll be looking at next week. In fact, the main message, on our first reading of it (which is what that was a few moments ago for many of us) is all to do with revenge and gloating over a national enemy. It's a bit like a local preacher standing up today and basing his or her sermon on how awful Germany or France is and predicting a very nasty time for them. George Adam Smith, a Biblical scholar of the early twentieth century, writes in his commentary on this book that *Obadiah* “brings no spiritual message. It speaks no word of sin, or of righteousness, or of mercy, but only doom upon Edom in bitter resentment at his cruelties.”

But if you spend a bit of time re-reading this little book a few times and look at some of the other scholars who have written about it (apart from good old George Adam Smith), you can start to see that there is a positive message for the reader and it does have something to say to us, even today. Yes, it is a book full of doom and despair, but it's also a book of great hope and faith (trust me!), a book with a message of great encouragement for God's people at all times and in all places.

As we've often noted before, in *2 Timothy 3:16* Paul writes: “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.” (*The Message*) And, as Oliver reminded us a couple of weeks ago, Jesus himself said that he had

come to “*fulfil the Law and the Prophets*”, so he must have felt there was some mileage in what they had to say. Indeed, as we’ll start to see as these blurry old books come into sharper focus, they contain the same messages about the Kingdom of God that Jesus was proclaiming and starting to live out throughout his earthly ministry, and which he started to bring to ultimate fulfilment through his own death, resurrection and glorification. So we should come to this odd little book with an expectation that God will speak to us in some way, as we’ve just prayed.

So, a bit of background then, which might just help us to set these words in some kind of context. The prophecy centres on Edom, the traditional enemy of Judah, the rump of the nation of Israel that remained after the various splits, invasions and deportations that had taken place over the centuries since they settled in their Promised Land. The Edomites – or Idumeans, as they are sometimes known – lived in the territory that bordered Judah to the south-east. The land was seemingly impregnable and the capital city was in the area where the ruins of the rock city of Petra now stand (v3 – “*you who live in the clefts of the rocks*”). It would have been extremely difficult for any enemy to capture Edom by orthodox military means. The people were descended from Esau and were known for being shrewd and devious in every way, particularly in matters of politics. Their only gift to history was the dynasty of the Herods who showed themselves to be so duplicitous and so impervious to spiritual truth in the New Testament. Look, for example at the reaction of Herod to Jesus in *Matthew 2* and in the narrative surrounding the trial and execution of Jesus. It was a Herod who, to save his own face, ordered that John the Baptist should lose his – and the rest of his head as well. And in *Acts 12:21* we read of the grisly end of another Herod who was eaten by worms.

The descendants of Esau were also typical of irreligious and self-centred people. *Hebrews 12:16* describes Esau’s own spiritual position – he was “*godless*” – and it’s interesting that nowhere in the Old Testament is there any mention of Edomite gods. They were a totally profane people with no sense of spirituality, no faith in the future, dead to the unseen and clamouring only for the satisfaction of their appetites.

The fact that they were descended from Esau explains to some extent the animosity that Judah, the descendants of Jacob, or Israel, showed towards them. You can read the background to all that in *Genesis 24,25*, the story of Jacob cheating Esau out of his birthright and blessing. But there is another episode that fed into this historic feud: in *Numbers 20* we read that Edom refused the Israelites passage through their territory as they made their way from the slavery of Egypt to their new life in the Promised Land during the Exodus. And even fresher in the minds of Obadiah’s listeners would have been the way in which the people of Edom had rejoiced at the overthrow of Judah by the Babylonians and the capture of Jerusalem. When Jerusalem fell in 587 BC, the Edomites capitalised on the plight of Judah, rejoicing in

its calamity (*Lamentations 4:21* – “Celebrate while you can, O Edom! Live it up in Uz! For it won’t be long before you drink this cup, too. You’ll find out what it’s like to drink God’s wrath, get drunk on God’s wrath and wake up with nothing, stripped naked.”) and generally behaving in a vengeful manner towards the stricken nation: look at *Psalms 137:7* – “Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’” – or *Ezekiel 25:12* – “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘Because Edom took revenge on Judah and became very guilty by doing so, therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill both man and beast.’” And they also actually helped the Babylonians in the destruction of Jerusalem, as we read in *Ezekiel 35*.

There is little wonder, then, that this prophecy should denounce Edom in such strong terms. The first sixteen verses deal with the wrongdoing of Edom and point to the judgement that they can expect. That is explicit in v7 and was fulfilled in the late sixth century BC through the intrigue of other powers in the region, leading to the takeover of the country by the Nabateans. But, as is so common among the Hebrew prophets, the first section of the prophecy, which deals with doom and threatening, is followed by a second section in which there is the promise of restoration for God’s people. So in vv17-21 we read of the “*Day of the Lord*”, the time when God’s righteousness will vindicate his people and the promised Kingdom of God will come to fulfilment. That, too, was partly fulfilled in the following centuries and began to reach its climax in the arrival of the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

Maybe we can sum up the situation in the words of one of the great preachers of the last century, Dr G Campbell Morgan: “*The background of the picture presented to us by Obadiah is Jacob; the foreground is Esau. Jacob and those descending from him can be seen passing through suffering, which is of the nature of chastisement, to ultimate restoration. Esau is seen as proud, rebellious, defiant, moving towards ultimate destruction.*”

That’s all very well, you may say, but what on earth does it have to teach us today, other than a few historical facts about a couple of ancient warring tribes? Well, Israel and Judah are always types of God’s people, of whom we are now the descendants by adoption through Jesus Christ. We can hear in what God has to say to Israel echoes of what he has to say today to those who have committed themselves to the work of the Kingdom of God and who have been saved for that through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Edom here is quite clearly a pointer to those who oppose God and his people. In what this obscure, virtually anonymous prophet Obadiah has to say about Edom, we can see a portrait of the world today – and, indeed, the world in any age. There is a strong message here for the international community and clear words for individuals as well. Let’s look first at what this has to say to the international community, recognising that those in positions of power act on our behalf using the power

delegated to them by God – and accepting that, as God’s people, we have a responsibility to call them to account when they move away from the values of the Kingdom. (Tom Wright’s latest book, *God in Public*, has a lot of good material on this theme, if you’re interested in following that up.)

1. **INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE**

The crimes that Obadiah outlines in *vv10-14* are still obvious today as we look around us. In fact, we don’t really need to look around: they are channelled into our living rooms and kitchens, flickering above bars and railway concourses, emblazoned on our newspapers and magazines – we cannot miss them. There were four major ways in which Edom was behaving unacceptably towards the peoples of other nation states and, as we’ve just said, we need to be able – and willing – to speak out as the prophets of old did to warn our national leaders of the ways in which they are participating in injustice and ignoring God’s ways, perverting the values of God’s Kingdom.

a) **Violence** (*v10*)

Edom had made life very difficult for its neighbour through its warlike attitude. The use of the word “*violence*” implies in itself that this was unjust and unnecessary. Wherever we look today, be it Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia or one of those random places around Europe selected by jihadists and psychopaths, we can see unnecessary or unjust violence. And we so often feel that the way to respond is with more violence – just look at the twisted logic of the powerful gun lobby in the USA. Our so-called civilised world has not moved on one bit from the time of Obadiah, except in the sophistication of its ways of killing and injuring other people, and the ways in which profits from the manufacture and sales of weapons have been absorbed into our economic activity and used to fund our pensions.

b) **Complicity** (*vv11,12*)

The Edomites stood and watched while Babylon attacked and overran its neighbour. It suited them to do so politically and economically. How often do we stand by and watch the injustices of the world at large without doing or saying anything? When intervention is agreed, it is never for reasons of justice or morality (whatever the government spokesmen might say), but usually for reasons of economic expediency. The Edomites actually had ties of blood with their Judean neighbours. And we forget so easily that all men and women are made in the image of God and so are deserving of our support in their struggle for justice; they need our voices to be raised on their behalf; they need our economic muscles to be flexed when that can make a difference. And we must always eschew the temptation to glory in the defeat of other people and nations.

c) **Taking advantage** (*v13*)

Economics was certainly a factor in the feud between Edom and Judah – Edom “*seized their wealth in the day of their disaster*”. They waited until the Babylonians had done all the dirty work and then swooped on the spoils. Our own nation makes an incredible amount of money through the economic benefits of war and oppression. The arms industry, instruments of torture and repression, skills and know-how that are sold to other nations – that all makes a huge contribution to our economy. Those skill and abilities, the research and development that could well be put to the use of actually improving the world – these are the ways in which we have become a latter-day Edom. Some years ago now I wrote to Norman Tebbit (remember him?), when he was at the Department of Trade and Industry, about the export of apparatus for torture to some very oppressive regimes and his reply consisted of a fairly offensive letter and a photocopy of a Commons reply which said that if we didn’t do it someone else would, so we might as well make as much money out of it as we could. That seems to me to be taking advantage of other peoples’ suffering in a way that can have no support whatsoever from the people of God – and I don’t suppose it’s any different now than it was twenty-five years ago.

d) Treatment of refugees (v14)

When some of the people from Judah did try to get help from Edom – help that they might have expected as an expression of common humanity, they find themselves either punished by the Edomites themselves or turned over to the Babylonians. How can anyone say that that isn’t relevant today? We see pictures and hear reports regularly about those who are seeking asylum from oppressive and unjust regimes, trying to escape violence and persecution. Racism – or, more likely, simple xenophobia – jealousy, petty economic judgement, selfishness and so on all have their part to play, as was the case with the Edomites and Judah. Yes, there may be some who are trying to abuse the system, but the vast majority are looking for assistance, hospitality and justice from the so-called Christian countries of the West, only to find that they are often denied. We can keep praying, keep lobbying – and get involved in initiatives such as the “Place of Welcome” scheme (see Rick Hill) or offering accommodation for those in greatest need (see Nick & Ruth Tinsdeall).

Our response to all such injustice is necessarily limited, but our voices still need to be heard, both in protest and in prayer. We, like Obadiah, have a call from God to make our voices heard in the face of so much injustice, corruption and unrighteousness, as we speak out on behalf of those in need.

2. PERSONAL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

We must not forget, though, the personal profanity of the people of Edom. As we have already said, there is much evidence in the Bible for believing that the Edomites are a byword for total opposition to God

and his word. They were people who lived only to satisfy their own appetites, whose lives were completely selfish, out to get what they could with no thought for others who might suffer in the process. Our society has become more and more like that even in my lifetime as societal constraints and common consensus about morality and ethics have been thrown to the wind in pursuit of economic goals.

Men and women have no thought for God, for his image in humankind, for any kind of compassion other than that which helps to salve their own consciences. Any sense of personal morality is good only for the moment and is usually quite self-serving. The people of God – those who take seriously the values and attitudes of God’s Kingdom – are hemmed in by those for whom justice has no meaning, any kind of morality is there only to bolster their own individualistic choices, and God has no existence beyond the work of their hands.

There really doesn’t seem to be any justice, does there? God’s people are at best ignored (or “put into perspective”), at worst persecuted – and I mean persecuted, not just prevented from wearing a cross at work – or even executed, depending on which part of the world the accident of geography means they inhabit. Any voices raised in protest by heads of government or by United Nations ambassadors are usually influenced by ideology and economics rather than by morality and justice. What is happening? What has been happening since Obadiah first spoke these words? Is God’s arm shortened that he cannot save? It all seems really gloomy – both in Obadiah’s day and now as we scan the news channels and read our newspapers. Well, the second part of this little prophecy points to some encouragement. As one commentator puts it, “*Divine sovereignty is the audacious, historically unlikely theme that Obadiah stresses.*” (L C Allen) God’s purposes are actually being fulfilled and, as Obadiah warns the Edomites, so God says to his enemies today, “*As you have done, so it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.*” That prophecy was fulfilled for Edom as they themselves were deceived and overthrown, but ultimately the same will be true of those who turn against God today.

1 Peter 4:12-14 is a reminder to us that times will be hard for the followers of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, but in the end the faithful will be vindicated: “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*” The characteristics of God’s Kingdom, the restored and renewed creation in which God’s original purposes for all beings will once again be fulfilled, are set out in *vv17,18*. Here, as elsewhere in the prophets and in the Old Testament, Mount Zion is a symbol for that triumphant Kingdom and we can catch a glimpse of what it will be like here.

a) **Deliverance**

No longer will God's people have to put up with the things that have previously held them in bondage, be it oppression, persecution or sin – the consequences of their own sin or of other peoples' sin. Everyone will be free in this new Kingdom of God, as God originally intended them to be in the Garden of Eden.

b) **Holiness**

God's Kingdom will be the model of holy living. God himself is holy and his people are to be like him in every respect. Sin, having been defeated for ever through the work of Jesus on the cross, will no longer affect the lives of the citizens of Zion and the consequences of sin – sorrow and pain – will be banished.

c) **Justice**

God's people will receive their inheritance, what is theirs by right because of God's promises and their adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. Not only will the people of God get what he has promised them, but so will his enemies, as the unrighteous will be punished. *"There will be no survivors,"* says Obadiah in v18.

But perhaps the most encouraging and triumphant line in this whole prophecy is the very last sentence: *"And the kingdom will be the LORD's."* If God is in control and has dealt with the enemies of his people, then we can have every confidence that it will be worthwhile being there. On top of that is the note of certainty that is implicit in Obadiah's statement: *"the kingdom WILL be the LORD's."* God is at work even now – he has been in the past (Edom's judgement actually happened) – and he will be at work in the future. We may look around us now and see that things are not as we would like them to be, but God is moving things inexorably towards their resolution – the life, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus bear ample testimony to that – and one day we shall have the privilege of spending all our time with him in perfect freedom. Yes, we must be prepared to take a stand and speak out against injustice and oppression and unrighteousness, but we do so knowing that it is God who vindicates his people.

Let me close with some words from a commentary by Douglas Stewart (one of the authors of *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*), which seem to sum it all up rather nicely:

"The Christian will see in Obadiah's prophecy not merely a description of certain political realities and hopes from the sixth century BC in Palestine, but also the more general reality and hope of God's intervention on behalf of his people to rescue them from helplessness in the face of mortal danger, and to guarantee them a bright future of reward for their faithfulness. The success of earthly powers arrayed against God's purposes can only be temporary, and the ultimate victory of God's people is assured."

With Obadiah we believe, *“The kingdom will be the LORD’s.”*

GOD’S JUSTICE WILL TRIUMPH
Obadiah 1-21

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament and seems to have the most obscure message. We know nothing about the author other than his name: the historical background is completely bound up with a local feud between two minor nations in the Ancient Near East almost 2,500 years ago: there is nothing that seems to point to the New Testament. George Adam Smith wrote: *“Obadiah brings no spiritual message. It speaks no word of sin, or of righteousness, or of mercy, but only doom upon Edom in bitter resentment at his cruelties.”* It is, indeed, a book of doom and despair, but there is also a sense of hope for God’s people.

The prophecy centres on Edom, traditional enemy of Judah. They were the descendants of Esau and were typical of irreligious and self-centred people. There is no talk of Edomite gods anywhere in the Old Testament – it appears that they were profane people with little or no sense of spirituality. On more than one occasion in the history of Israel and Judah, the Edomites had profited from their misfortunes and in the recent past had actually helped the Babylonians in the destruction of Jerusalem.

In what Obadiah has to say about Edom, we can see certain warnings for the world today – both for the international community and for individuals.

- International Injustice
 - Violence (v10)
 - Complicity (vv11,12)
 - Taking advantage (v13)
 - Treatment of refugees (v14)
- Personal selfishness and profanity

The second part of the prophecy does seem to offer some encouragement. As L C Allen puts it: *“Divine sovereignty is the audacious, historically unlikely theme that Obadiah stresses.”* God’s purposes **are** being fulfilled and as Obadiah warns the Edomites in v15, so God says to those who oppose him today. The characteristics of God’s Kingdom are set out in vv17,18. Mount Zion, symbol of God’s triumphant Kingdom, will be a place of:

- Deliverance
- Holiness
- Justice

Maybe the most uplifting line in the prophecy is the last one – *“And the Kingdom will be the LORD’s.”* If God is in control and has dealt with the enemies of his people, then we can have confidence in him and in his Kingdom. Douglas Stuart writes: *“The Christian will see in Obadiah’s prophecy not merely a description of certain political realities and hopes from the sixth century BC in Palestine, but also the more general reality and hope of God’s intervention on behalf of his people to rescue them from helplessness in the face of mortal danger, and to guarantee them a bright future of reward for their faithfulness. The success of earthly powers arrayed against God’s purposes can only be temporary, and the ultimate victory of God’s people is assured.”*

1. Does it matter who Obadiah was? Why should we bother studying these minor prophets?
2. Has the modern world moved on at all since the time of Obadiah?
3. Does v11 have anything to say to today’s international community? What could be done practically about it?
4. Isn’t God just being spiteful in v15?
5. *“The ultimate victory of God’s people is assured.”* Is it? How can we be sure?

6. What do you think of the book of Obadiah?