

The Message of Obadiah for Today

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What can a book like Obadiah, which is focused mostly on Edom, a state that disappeared over 2,000 years ago, have to say to the church and the world today?

Despite the significant attention the book of Obadiah gives to Edom, its theological horizon reaches far beyond this former and kindred neighbour of Judah and their relationship in the sixth century BC. Yet we need to look at the background of Obadiah if we are to hear its message clearly.

Because Edom descended from Jacob's brother Esau (Genesis 36), it had correspondingly greater obligations toward its relation in Judah. All the same, and despite the fact that Jacob and Esau were reconciled to one another before parting ways (Gen. 33:4-17), the two nations that descended from them were often in conflict. Nowhere is this conflict clearer, and nowhere is Edom's adversarial role more visible than in the events surrounding the fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Writing immediately after the Babylonian invasion of Judah and the subsequent exile of many of its elite to Babylon, Obadiah focuses on the final example of Edom's mistreatment of its kinfolk in two contexts, one present and one future.

The Present Context

First. Edom, as a state, trusted in its easily defended location on the rocky plateau to Judah's southeast, taking on airs of invincibility and unaccountability (Obad. 3-4). This same pride led Edom to assume that its relationships with its allies would work to its advantage when quite the opposite was true (Obad. 5-9).

Edom's most flagrant sin, however, was its denial of any compassion, not to say brotherly kindness, to the Judeans who fled Judah in the face of the Babylonian attack in 586. Rather than provide shelter (which some Edomites did; Jer. 40:11), the

Edomites who displayed the same pragmatic, God-ignoring attitudes condemned earlier in the book seized this opportunity to exact vengeance by killing these escapees (Obad. 14) or to benefit themselves by handing them over to the Babylonians (Obad. 14).

The Future Context

This sin, and God's response to it, draw the events of 586 into a second context, the Day of the LORD. This "day" is in fact a progressive realisation of God's punishment of sin and of His deliverance of those who repent. In the rest of Obadiah, God will first punish Edom's sin (Obad. 15), and then pour out His wrath on all the "nations" who live as these Edomites did: ignoring Him, despising His people, and living solely for their own benefit and glory. Alongside this judgment, He will deliver His people, defined as those who revere God and live for His glory, and bring them to a renewed Jerusalem (Obad. 17) and a restored promised land (Obad. 19-20) that are free of sin and that manifest His consummated reign over all things.

Keeping in mind that by "Edom" Obadiah refers to those Edomites who acted as described in his book, and not to every descendant of Esau (cf. Amos 9:12), the message of Obadiah for today can be described in terms of three concentric circles. Each of them must be seen in connection with the two most significant episodes of the Day of the LORD in Scripture. The first Day of the LORD occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when He bore the sin of His people and rose again for their justification. The second Day of the LORD will involve the deliverance of those who are in Christ and the punishment of all who refuse Him at His return (1 Thess. 1:10).

The smallest circle focuses on God's justice in punishing those who mistreat His people (Obad. 15; Gen 12:3). Even though God allows sin, He will eventually punish it and maintain His justice in so doing. When the righteous are persecuted, God's word calls us to patience (James 5:6-11), to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), and to suffer in a way that follows Christ's example (1 Peter 2:20-23). In all these things, despite appearances, we are more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37). We can rest assured that God uses even affliction to further His work in us (1 Peter 1:6-7) and through us (Phil. 1:12-18).

The second circle concerns more generally those (regardless of nationality or ethnicity) who live as if they were the masters of their own destiny (Obad. 2-9). This shows the condemnation of every human being who persists in rebellion against God and in pursuit of autonomy, as all of us do by nature (Titus 3:3).

Modern societies' trust in their technical ability, which persists even in the face of epidemics like the coronavirus, is a fruit of deeply rooted self-sufficiency and self-deception. Violence and opportunism, whether in economic, political, or military spheres, consistently show the disregard of the powerful for those less powerful or privileged. Within the church in particular, our failure to humble ourselves before God's greatness and our desire to advance ourselves (James 4:1-4) reveal that we often adopt the world's means and ends as we abandon reverence for God along with our role as servants of one another (Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10) and members of the same spiritual body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27).

The third and largest circle drawn by Obadiah includes both the final deliverance of God's people and the destruction of His enemies.

Here, the trio of faith, hope, and love helps us see some of the ways this truth should affect us. Edom's fall long ago, Christ's first coming, and the preservation and growth of the church over millennia all demonstrate the truth of God's promise to deliver His people and repay His enemies. His truthfulness strengthens our faith in His word, even in difficult circumstances. This faith gives rise to hope, for the arrival of God's kingdom in its fullness and the complete deliverance of all His people is sure!

Believers are identified as "heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7) because we are to live in light of what God will do for us and for all His people when Christ returns.

Finally, love is at the heart of the Christian life. Having learned God's love through the gospel (Titus 3:4; 1 John 4:9), love for Him cannot but flow out in return (1 John 4:19). This love also expresses itself in love for others, not only in the church (1 John 4:7, 11) but outside it (cf. John 3:16).

Believers who know the terrible danger in which sinners stand,

and recall that they were once in the same terrible predicament (Titus 3:3), will be committed to bringing this good news to those around them. Obadiah leads us to pray and work toward the end and goal of all things: “thy kingdom come” (Obad. 21; Matt. 6:10).

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