

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Obadiah**

## **September 7, 2014**

### **The Message of Obadiah: Does God Have Enemies?**

Does God have enemies? How would you answer this question?

If you are one kind of Muslim, you might answer that question, “Yes, God’s enemies are the Americans and Israelis!”

If you are a Hindu nationalist, you might say, “Yes, it’s the Muslims and the Christians!”

Having “enemies” is not something God does, right? People have enemies, sure, but not God!

Well, it is true that people do have enemies. Our lives confirm it daily. Everything from the personal trials we face to the terrible actions of September 11, 2001, reminds us that humans simply make enemies of one another. Faced with the “ubiquity of conflict” in this world, Samuel Huntington has observed, “It is human to hate.” Most of us can agree with this much.

### **Introducing Obadiah**

“Does God have enemies?” is one of the eternal questions raised by the series of books we are presently surveying in the Old Testament called the “Minor Prophets.” The Minor Prophets are the shorter books at the end of the Old Testament. “Minor” does not mean “unimportant” – it just means “short” as compared to the generally longer “Major Prophets.” In this study, we will look particularly at the shortest book in the Old Testament, the book of Obadiah.

Most of the other prophets speak to Old Testament believers – and to Christians in churches. But Obadiah proclaimed a vision from the sovereign God to a people who knew no theology and who had no place for the knowledge of God in their lives. Unlike the audience of the other prophets, Obadiah’s audience made no pretence of acknowledging God. In other words, he spoke to a society much like our own.

In this little book, God teaches us about who he is, who his friends are, and who his enemies are. Let's begin by reading, in its entirety, this brief prophecy of Obadiah, as he prophesies God's judgment on the people of Edom, the people who lived just south of Judah.

### **Who Are God's Enemies (v. 1-16)**

First, then, who are God's enemies?

#### ***The Proud***

In the first few verses of the book, we immediately observe one answer to that question: the proud.

Historically, Obadiah appears to have been written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 587 B.C. Amid this terrible plight among God's people, their next-door neighbors to the southeast, the Edomites, did nothing to help (to put it mildly!). The Edomites were the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau (see Genesis 36).

But this little book is not merely the condemnation of an outraged Israelite. In fact, we don't even know that Obadiah was an Israelite; we don't know anything about him, really. Twelve different people in the Old Testament bear his name. And it may not have actually been the author's name. "Obadiah" means "servant of Yahweh," so perhaps the name was simply a descriptive title for this messenger who wrote it. Obadiah brought not his own message but the Word of God: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says about Edom – We have heard a message from the Lord. An envoy was sent to the nations to say, 'Rise, and let us go against her for battle'" (Obadiah 1).

It's possible that there were rumblings of war about the time this book was written, and the Edomites may have been slightly fearful that Babylon would invade them. Obadiah's language of wartime was not mere scaremongering. He was genuinely warning them. Disaster was coming, and it was coming from God! The envoy calling to the nations to do battle was calling, it seems, to the nations of the Babylonian empire to wage battle on Edom.

At the same time, nothing in the book suggests that Edom was in a particularly low state when Obadiah delivered his message. In fact, God's promise to make Edom "small among the nations" (v. 2) suggests that they regarded themselves somewhat highly among the nations. They were proud. Obadiah's message would probably have come as a surprise to them. Yes, a few rumors of war may have been

circulating, but the people certainly were not aware of any looming “judgment.” Besides, they lived in a naturally impregnable position, atop mountains in cities that could be reached only by narrow, winding passages. Judah had just fallen, and, to be honest, its fall had enriched Edom. More north/south trade was now passing through Edom’s side of the Jordan. In short, times were good.

If you are a non-Christian, please recognize the futility of making anything your final security other than God himself. God made us in his image so that we might know him, and one day he will call us to account. There is nothing else in this world that is so certain. It does not matter how strong or prosperous or successful you feel. God made you to give account to him, and you will. He is your only security.

That is what Obadiah told the nation of Edom, who felt so strong and self-sufficient. The Lord said to Edom, “The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’” (v. 3). Edom was a small nation, but it was situated, like Switzerland, in an apparently impenetrable region of rocky heights and passes. And their hearts were well symbolized by their geography – high and hard, certain and proud.

But that’s where they made a fatal error. They thought they could see and survey all the surrounding country because of their position. Their pride deluded them. “ ‘Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord” (v. 4). God was not as impressed with their natural strategic defenses as they were.

It is amazing to see what people proudly put their trust in. You may remember learning about the famous Maginot Line between France and Germany. From 1929 to 1938, the French built a line of defensive fortifications along their border with Germany under the direction of French war minister André Maginot. Heavy guns, thick concrete, air-conditioned living areas, areas for recreation, and even underground railways all assured the French that they would be safe against German aggression. When the German military began to build itself back up under Adolf Hitler, the French smugly thought they could ignore the matter. They had the Maginot Line! Of course, when the Germans finally invaded, they came through Belgium, outflanking the Maginot Line and rendering it utterly useless. It took ten years to build. It took the Germans a few weeks to march around it.

Spend as much time as you want building something; imagine all the things it can protect you from; it still won't protect you.

Yet we want our own Maginot Lines, and then we put our trust in them. So we give obsessive attention to our appearance, our bodies, our possessions, our accomplishments, our jobs, or our friendships. We trust in *them* to bring our accomplishments, our jobs, or our friendships. We trust in them to bring peace and security. All of these things, of course, are extensions of our own power, reflections of our own ability, declarations of our own proud independence from God. But what if none of these things last as long as you do? What if your employer, your wealth, your parents or children, your house, your health, your ministry, a particularly relationship, *even your physical life* does not last as long as you do? That's what the Bible teaches will happen. Listen again: “ ‘Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord” (v. 4).

For the rise of every great power in world history, a decline follows. Having power is one of the most trying experiences that humans – individually or collectively – can ever know.

Edom was not a superpower; it was a small nation. But it was a proud nation. And such pride is never appropriate for creatures like us.

Humility is the way of God himself. In humility, God put on human flesh in Jesus Christ. In humility, Christ came and washed the feet of his disciples, pointing to an even greater cleansing. In humility, Christ went to his death on the cross, offering this greater cleansing from sin for all those who would ever repent and believe in him. Humility is the way of Christ.

So must it be for all Christians. God hates the proud (cf. Proverbs 6:16-17). Therefore, we must humble ourselves before God.

### ***The Opponents of God's People***

But what exactly had Edom done? How had their pride shown itself? Those are the questions that verses 5-16 answer. Here we find that God opposes not just the proud, but those who oppose his people.

In verse 5, God shows that Edom's pride has led it into heinous sin against Judah, which he compares with the actions of robbers and grape pickers: “If thieves came to you, if robbers in the night...would they not steal only as much as they wanted?”

If grape pickers came to you, would they not leave a few grapes?" In other words, neither robbers nor grape pickers will take *everything*. They take only what they need. But Edom had been merciless in its treatment of Judah.

"Oh, what a disaster awaits you," God says in the middle of verse 5. Their ruination would not be partial; the nations would enter their strongholds and leave their towns and houses bare. "How Esau will be ransacked, his hidden treasures pillaged!" (v. 6). No investments were secure and no dwellings were safe. All protections and precautions would be useless, because God would use the Babylonians to conquer and plunder.

And who better to bring God's judgment than the very ones Edom had trusted and relied upon in place of God. "Your allies will force you to the very border; your friends will deceive and overpower you" (v. 7a). If you like suspense films, you know that skillful directors often employ the gullible, inordinate trust one character will place in another individual who appears to be a friend or ally but is really a mortal enemy. The Edomites places such an inordinate trust in the Babylonians, and now their protectors would become their devourers: "those who eat your bread [meal-sharing companions] will set a trap for you, but you will not detect it" (v. 7b). The Edomites thought they were wise, but they were deceived. They detected nothing.

God promises that the proud will be humbled. And he abhors the nation who treats other people as if those other people belonged to the nation rather than to God.

Especially when those others are God's own people!

God makes this point throughout the Bible. Do you remember what the risen Christ said to the Christian-persecuting Saul when he appeared to him on the road to Damascus? "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" (Acts 9:4). Christ identifies so closely with his people that he refers to them as himself. God demonstrates a similar kind of identification with his people in the book of Obadiah. Actions against God's people are actions against God.

In verse 8, God restates his promise to destroy Edom, but in much more explicit terms: " 'In that day,' declares the Lord, 'will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau?'" Whatever cleverness or wit had been previously demonstrated in arranging Edom's political affairs was shallow and short-sighted. Their wise men could not save them now.

Neither could their strong men: “Your warriors, O Teman, will be terrified and everyone in Esau’s mountains will be cut down in the slaughter” (v. 9). Why would this happen? “Because of the violence against your brother Jacob...” (v. 10a). The Lord refers to Edom’s “brother Jacob” because Edom, or Esau, was the brother of Jacob (also called “Israel”). God is referring to them according to the individual ancestors to whom they trace their identity – Esau for the Edomites and Jacob for the Israelites. The larger point being made, of course, is to demonstrate how outrageous it was for Edom not to offer hospitality to fleeing Israelites, but violence instead. Their violence was not violence against strangers, but against brothers. Because of this outrage, says God, “you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever” (v. 10b).

In verses 11-15, Obadiah explains more fully the nature of Edom’s violence against Israel. Part of their violence was simply to comply with the violence of others: “On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem – you were like one of them” (v. 11).

Any nation should have known better; but given their relationship to Judah, Edom especially should have known better. So God reproaches them” “You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune, nor rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction, nor boast so much in the day of their trouble” (v. 12).

In all this, the book of Obadiah foreshadows the figure of Herod, who we know from extrabiblical literature was a descendant of the Edomites. He too attacked the infants in Bethlehem, attempting to kill God’s chosen one.

### **Who Are God’s Friends (verses 17-21a)**

It is God’s fierce, personal love that brings us to our second question: Who are God’s friends?

In verse 13 of Obadiah, we saw that God called the Israelites “my people.”

In other words, Obadiah teaches not only that God is the Judge of all who are proud and who oppose his people, he teaches that God is the Friend of his people. He cares for his people.

Here in Obadiah, the nation of Israel had fallen under God's judgment, but God was not finished with them yet. Though they too suffered, their fate would ultimately be different than Edom's.

In a reversal of fortunes for Israel and Edom, the Lord speaks:

Obadiah 17-18

Amid God's words of judgment against Edom, God also speaks words of hope for his people. Not only would the wicked receive justice, God's people would be restored.

Undeniably, our experiences of suffering and pain as God's children cause us to explore the depth and breadth of God's love more fully, as we have to depend on him more completely. Our trials teach us to despair of those other things we wrongly trust in; they teach us to despair of ourselves; they teach us to trust in Christ, God's Son, who makes us God's friends. As Jesus said to his followers, "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends" (John 15:14-15).

So here in Obadiah, God's people are given hope amid despair, as if God were promising to bring them back to live from the dead. Indeed, in these final verses, God promises his people that they will return from exile and regain their lost lands:

Obadiah 19-21a

God will make Mount Zion holy again; he will again dwell with his people.

In one sense, these promises were fulfilled within a few decades, when a number of the Israelites returned from the exile in Babylon to the land of Judah. But the author also seems to perceive dimly that this resurrected kingdom will include all of God's people. Thus he includes a reference to the "house of Joseph." The house of Joseph was a part of the northern kingdom that had been dispersed among the nations 150 years earlier. The fulfillment to which Obadiah alludes was not ultimately experienced by Ezra or Nehemiah, two of the returning exiles. Rather, God's words through Obadiah will be ultimately fulfilled when God's people are in God's place under God's rule through the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Who Is God? (verse 21b)**

Finally, we must look at the last phrase in Obadiah: “And the kingdom will be the Lord’s” (v. 21b). God’s kingship is the real message of this little book. God used Obadiah to show both Edom and Judah that he is the king. He used it to show Babylon that he is the king.

The people who first heard Obadiah’s brief prophecy would have been struck by God’s commitment to avenge his people’s loss. God’s commitment is clear and uncompromising.

So was Edom destroyed? Yes, Edom was first invaded in the next century by Arabs. Then it suffered wave after wave of invasion until the nation finally dissolved. It was never reconstituted.

Were the Israelites restored? Yes, partially. But the fuller restoration Obadiah prophesied about began when Jesus Christ came and declared that the kingdom of God had begun, and then ushered many Jews and non-Jews into God’s reign over their lives. When Christ took on flesh and lived among us, he showed us truth and gave our lives the possibility of meaning. As Jesus said to his disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jews and Gentiles came together in their new life in Christ’s church, and God’s rule became visible.

My question for you is, who are you? Are you an enemy or a friend of God? The Bible teaches that every one of us is God’s enemy by nature. That is the language of the Bible, not some group of fundamentalist Christians who are mean-spirited and narrow-minded. The apostle Paul taught that “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (Romans 3:9). He also taught that we are all “by nature objects of [God’s] wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). And Jesus taught that all of our sinful actions and thoughts reveal that we have sinful hearts (Mark 7:20-23).

