

OBADIAH (Sermon for July 16, 2023)

The vision of Obadiah.

“Obadiah” means “worshipper of Yahweh.” There are 13 “Obadiah’s” mentioned in the Old Testament. One of these four might be this man: 1. An officer in the northern kingdom’s King Ahab who hid God’s prophets in a cave (1 Kings 18:3); 2. A man sent by southern kingdom King Jehoshaphat to teach the law to cities (2 Chronicles 17:7); 3. An overseer who helped repair the temple under southern kingdom King Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:12; or 4. A priest in the days of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 10:5).

This is what the LORD God says about Edom—

Obadiah’s message is against the people of Edom. “Edom” is another name for “Esau,” the son of Isaac and twin brother of Jacob. “Edom” means “red,” because he probably had red hair. Though he was favored by his father Isaac, he had showed so little respect for God’s blessing on him that he was willing to sell his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. This birthright included the great promise God had given to his grandfather Abraham, that through Abraham’s family God would bless the whole world.

When the people of Israel—“Israel” was the new name God gave Jacob, so these are his descendants, not Esau’s—came out of Egypt and wanted to pass through Edom, the Edomites did not let them. The Edomites opposed King Saul and were conquered by David. Edom joined Moab and Ammon to attack the southern kingdom under Jehoshaphat, though God led Jehoshaphat to victory. Edom successfully rebelled against southern kingdom King Jehoram and attacked that kingdom under King Ahaz. But especially we hear from the book of Esdras, one of those books written between the time of the Old and New Testaments, that the Edomites preyed on the people of the southern kingdom of Judah after they fled from Jerusalem when it was captured by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

We have heard a message from the LORD: An envoy was sent to the nations to say: “Rise, let us go against her for battle”—“See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly despised. 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?’ Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,” declares the LORD.

If you have ever been to the Omaha Zoo, they have a display of deserts of the world. It has three sections. In one section there are hyraxes, rodent like animals that hop around on the cliffs. Hyraxes are common in Edom, because of all its cliffs. Edom was located east of the Dead Sea. You grow crops in the narrow valleys where the little rain is concentrated and the sides protect from the intense sun. It is the land where a later people, the Nabateans, built the famous city of Petra out of caves in the rocks. Edom was never a great nation, but it was protected by its cliffs. But God promises they will be destroyed.

That might have been good news for the people of Israel, but what does it have to do with us?

Edom preyed on the refugees from Jerusalem, They taunted them as they were defeated by Babylon. They took advantage of Judah's vulnerabilities. But also they did nothing to help God's people. As Obadiah said, "On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off Judah's wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem."

In the explanation to the fifth commandment we proclaim not only that we should not hurt, nor harm our neighbor, but we should "help and befriend him on every bodily need." In the seventh commandment we not only to not take from our neighbor, but help him "to protect and improve his property and business." In the eighth commandment we not only should not lie against our neighbor, but "defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything."

Are we like Edom, sitting comfortably on our high perch, watching the misfortune of others? Is this us?

You should not gloat over 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.

But there is more for us. Obadiah says, "The day of the LORD is near for all nations." Like the other nations who threatened God's people, God would defeat Edom. We heard last week about how this relates to us. God will defeat in the end all earthly powers that persecute God's people.

But our threats are not just from the outside, from the Assyrians like we heard about last week in Nahum. They are also from those close to us. It is one thing to have people at work or neighbors that are not Christian. It can be much harder when the members of your own family are not, when they do not want to go with you to church, when we see grandchildren not being raised in the faith, when our children go off to college or to the work world and establish their own life apart from church. This is a challenge to our faith, not because we are persecuted, but because of the hurt of seeing loved ones fall from the faith, just as Edom fell away from God—not some foreign nation, but brothers, fellow descendants of Abraham.

But listen to what Obadiah says:

The LORD has spoken. People from the Negev will occupy the mountains of Esau, and people from the foothills will possess the land of the Philistines. They will occupy the fields of Ephraim and Samaria, and Benjamin will possess Gilead. This company of Israelite exiles who are in Canaan will possess the land as far as Zarephath; the exiles from Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will possess the towns of the Negev. Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the LORD's.

God would restore His people. The “Negev” is the desert area south of Israel. People there looked up to the cliffs to see Edom. “Philistia” is the Mediterranean coast. The fields of Ephraim and Samaria is where the northern kingdom lived before Assyria destroyed it. “Gilead” is the land east of the Jordan. “Zarephath” is in modern day Lebanon. This is where the prophet Elijah lived with a widow who was from a pagan nation. “Sepharad” is believed to be Sardis in modern day Turkey. In classic irony the very people of Judah that the Edomites mocked would occupy Edom as people like the Babylonians turned on Edom.

God’s restoration would not just be for the physical descendants of Israel, but through Christ Jesus for all people. God has not given up on those who have fallen from Him. The Edomites as a nation were eliminated finally by the Romans, but their descendants lived on as people who became Christian. The famous pagan temples in Petra were replaced by churches. And we pray to God to restore our own loved ones to Him.

Obadiah’s message may never have been heard among the Edomites of his day, but it was a message of hope to the people who would go into exile in Babylon. And it is a message of hope for us that not only will God deliver us from those who would oppose our faith, but that He can turn their hearts to join us in loving Him.