

OBADIAH: Death to Edom!

by Ray C. Stedman

Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament, is the pronouncement of doom against an ancient and long-forgotten nation, the land of Edom. But there is more to this book than that. The Scriptures have that beautiful faculty of appearing to be one thing on the surface, but, on a deeper level, yielding rich and mighty treasures. That is certainly true of this amazing book of Obadiah.

We know very little about Obadiah except that he was one of the minor prophets. There is a reference to a prophet Obadiah in the days of Elijah and Elisha and there is some thought that perhaps he is the same man. The name Obadiah was a very common name among the Hebrews, though, and it is very likely this is not the same prophet, for in this book Obadiah mentions the day when Jerusalem was destroyed, captured by the alien armies, and that occurs long after the time of Elijah and Elisha. So most Bible commentators believe the author of this book was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, the last of the prophets before Israel went into captivity.

The name *Obadiah* means “the servant of Jehovah;” he fulfills the position of a servant. He comes and does his work and fades into the background; he delivers his message and he is gone. And that is about all we know about the man behind this book.

The book of Obadiah tells the story of two nations, the nation of Israel and the nation of Edom, the country to the south of Israel that is now usually referred to as the Negev or Negeb. Through this ancient land of Edom the Israelites marched as they came into the land of Israel out of the captivity and slavery of Egypt. As they came into the land they had difficulty with the Edomites; they were enemies of Israel from its very beginning.

But behind the story of these two nations, this book tells the story of two men. Every nation in the Bible is a lengthened shadow of its founder, and the two men behind the nations Israel and Edom were twin brothers. Do you know who they are? Jacob and Esau. Jacob was the father of Israel, and Esau, his twin brother, became the father of the Edomites. In the story of these nations you also have the extended story of these two men, Jacob and Esau. God, in a sense, has put Jacob and Esau into an enlarger and blown them up to national size. As the prophet discusses this you can see that the story of these two men continues; Israel is still Jacob and Edom is still Esau.

Jacob and Esau were in perpetual antagonism. We read in the book of Genesis that even before they were born, they struggled together in their mother’s womb. That antagonism marked the lives of these two men, and, consequently, the lives of their descendants, the two nations of Israel and Edom.

And as you recall from Genesis, Jacob was mother’s darling and Esau was daddy’s little man, and there was one unending conflict between the two of them which did not end with the lives of these men. The nations carried on this same conflict, and all the way from Genesis through Malachi there is the threat of struggle and unbroken antagonism between them. In the book of Malachi (remember, Genesis records the beginning of these nations), the last book of the Old Testament, God says, “I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau,” (Mal 1:2b-3a RSV).

Why does the story of these two men come to a focus here in this little prophecy of Obadiah? What is so important about these two men and these two nations? Well, that is what the book of Obadiah makes very clear to us. In the New Testament we discover that there is a perpetual an-

tagonism within the nature of the Christian. In Galatians 5:17 we are told that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; they are opposed to one another.

God is a great illustrator. He is always using pictures for us so that we can understand truth more easily, more graphically. We are children in this respect. We like to have a picture. We would rather see something than hear it, so God has many pictures. He has taken these two men and the subsequent nations that came from them and used them through the Bible as a consistent picture of the conflict between the flesh and the spirit – Jacob and Esau, Israel and Edom.

(This, by the way, is a wonderful key to Bible study. Have you learned to recognize what we might call *interpretational constants* that run throughout the Scriptures? There are certain names and figures, or metaphors and similes that, once used to symbolize a thing, maintain that characteristic and that reference all the way through the Bible, wherever they are used. You know how this is true of certain items, certain material things, like oil:

- Wherever oil is used symbolically in Scriptures it is a picture of the Holy Spirit.
- Wine is always a picture of joy in the Scriptures.
- Leaven is always a picture of evil.
- These two men, Jacob and Esau, and the nations Israel and Edom, always appear as a picture of a struggle between the flesh and the spirit that is going on in our own lives as believers.

Esau lusts against Jacob, and Jacob against Esau; the two great principles are irreconcilably opposed to one another.)

Obadiah turns the spotlight first on Esau, who is the man of the flesh, and Edom, the proud nation that came from the flesh, and he answers the question “Why does God hate Esau?” The trouble with Esau, the prophet says, is this (Verse 3):

**The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,
whose dwelling is high,**

**who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the
ground?” {Ob 1:3 RSV}**

The trouble with Esau is pride. Pride is the root of all human evil, and pride is the basic characteristic of what the Bible calls the flesh that lusts against, wars against, the Spirit. The flesh is a principle that stands athwart God’s purposes in human life and continually defies what God is trying to accomplish. Each of us has this struggle within us if we are Christians, and its basic characteristic is revealed here as pride. That is the number one identifying mark of the flesh.

Proverbs 6:16 says: “There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him.” And what is #1 on the list? A proud look. And everything else that follows is a variation of pride. Those that are swift to run after mischief, he that spreads lies and slander and discord among brothers – all these things are manifestations of that single basic evil, pride. This is the satanic nature which was implanted in the human race; all who are born of Adam have this congenital twist of pride, the independent ego that evaluates everything only in terms of its importance, or its unimportance, to self. The universe centers around self, the rival god. That is pride. That is Esau; that is Edom. It can appear in our lives in ten thousand ways, but you will find some common expressions of it here in this book of Obadiah.

One way it may be expressed is in self-sufficiency (Verses 3-4):

**... who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the
ground?”
Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
thence I will bring you down,” says the
Lord. {Ob 1:3b-4 RSV}**

Here is the man who says, “Nobody can touch me. Who is going to upset me? My plans are all laid out. I am able to carry through what I set out to do.” This attitude of self-sufficient ability is a mark of pride. And the Lord says that “though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, yet I am able to bring you down.”

The reference in this book to “you who live in the clefts of the rock” is a very literal reference to the nation of Edom. If you have had the privilege

of visiting the Holy Land, you may have gone down into the Negev area and visited the city of Petra, the rose-red city of the dead. This amazing city is approached through a tremendous fissure that runs for a mile or more right through the rock, a narrow file only a few yards wide that brings you at last into an open place where temples have been carved out of the living rock – giant temples with doorways in them some 25-30 feet high. That was the capital of Edom. That was the ancient city, whose people felt that because of these natural defenses they were impregnable. They lifted up their hearts in pride and, as the Lord speaking through the prophet says, the pride of their heart is deceived; they thought that nothing could overthrow them, but God said it would be done. Just a few years after our Lord's day, the Romans came in and destroyed the cities of Edom and took this impregnable fortress. It has been in ruins ever since.

This kind of self-sufficiency is clearly evident in the man who says, "I don't need God. I can run my own life without God, in my own wisdom, my own strength, my own abilities, my own talents – that is enough, that is all I need to make a success in life." But self-sufficiency is also seen in the Christian who says, "Well, I need God, yes, in times of danger and fear and pressure, but I am quite able, thank you, to make my own decisions about the girl I am going to marry, or the career I am going to follow, or the friends that I have, or the car that I buy or anything else like that." That is the same spirit of self sufficiency, isn't it?

The thing that characterized the Lord Jesus Christ and marked him as continually opposed to this spirit of self-sufficiency was his utter dependence on the Father. We Christians have to learn that if there is any area of our life where we think that we've got what it takes to do without God, it is in that same area that we are manifesting the flesh, the pride of Edom. When you step into your office on Monday morning and you have been a fine Christian on Sunday and all through the weekend, but on Monday morning you say, "Now I am in charge. I know what to do here. I don't need the Bible. I don't need God. I don't need my religion to help me here. I know exactly how to run this business," you are manifesting this same spirit of Edom, this spirit of self-sufficiency. In many areas of their lives Christians live as though God were dead, they believe in God, but live as though he

were dead, they live without any sense of dependency upon his wisdom and his strength.

Another form of pride is found in this little book too (Verse 10):

**For the violence done to your brother Jacob,
shame shall cover you,
and you shall be cut off for ever.
{Ob 1:10 RSV}**

Violence is a form of pride; the man who strikes his wife, a child who has been beaten, a baby whose bones have been broken, and who has been damaged internally. What is behind this violence of the human heart? An unbroken ego, a spoiled and cowardly spirit. Pride is centered only on self and it strikes out against anything that dares to challenge its supreme reign in life. I have been in a Christian home and seen a woman with black eyes and bruises on her legs and arms because her Christian husband, who was a Sunday School teacher, had beaten her. Where does this violence come from? It is from Edom. It is the pride of the flesh.

Here is another form of pride (Verse 11):

**On the day that you stood aloof,
on the day that strangers carried off his
wealth,
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them. {Ob 1:11 RSV}**
[You just stood and watched.]

Indifference is a form of pride. I think this is by far one of the major causes of marital difficulty. In the constant stream of people who have come to see me about problems in their marriage, almost invariably, somewhere along the line, I hear the complaint. "Well, he is simply indifferent to me. He doesn't care about me. He ignores me." Or, "She pays no attention to me. She isn't interested in the things that I am interested in." Isn't it strange that these things can be true in Christian homes? And how quickly it comes in after courtship. During the courtship it is, "What are you thinking about? Tell me what you would like?" But when marriage comes, it is, "Where's dinner? Where is the paper? What's on TV?" And the concern is entirely different. Why? Well, Esau is

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at work – that’s why. The force in human life that God hates is Esau.

There is yet another form of pride that we read about in Obadiah (Verses 12-13):

**But you should not have gloated over the
day of your brother
in the day of his misfortune;
you should not have rejoiced over the peo-
ple of Judah
in the day of their ruin;
you should not have boasted
in the day of distress.
You should not have entered the gate of my
people
in the day of his calamity;
you should not have gloated over his disas-
ter
in the day of his calamity;
you should not have looted his goods
in the day of his calamity.**
 {Ob 1:12-13 RSV}

God charges Edom with the sin of gloating as a manifestation of this basic problem of pride. Notice how you hear this so frequently in children who haven’t yet learned to cover up what they feel with a subtle varnish of politeness: “Yay, yah, yah, good for you. You had it coming!” Did you ever say that in your own heart about somebody? “You had it coming.” You were gloating over them. Adults learn to disguise this sometimes, but it comes out once in a while. You hear that the boss is sick, and you say. “Nothing trivial, I hope.” What do you say when someone fails and you hear about it? Do you ever say, “Well, I told you so. I knew that would happen. I expected it all along”? That is the sense of gloating, you see.

I remember reading of the hypochondriac who had written on his tombstone the words: “I told you I was sick.”

Now, what causes this? Why do we like to rub salt on another’s wounds? What is behind this perverse delight we take in another person’s failure or his faults? It is Esau in us. The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. In our pride and unconcern we don’t care what happens to someone else, as long as everything is all right with us.

Another manifestation of pride is exploitation (Verse 14):

**You should not have stood at the parting of
the ways
to cut off his fugitives;
you should not have delivered up his survi-
vors
in the day of distress. {Ob 1:14 RSV}**

When calamity fell, Edom took advantage of it. The Edomites moved in on a fallen people, a captured people, took advantage of the fact that these were fugitives, and used their trouble and their misery to their own advantage. They delivered up the survivors in the day of Israel’s distress. They took unfair advantage. God hates it when we utilize another’s weakness or bad luck to our advantage.

Have you ever heard anyone say, “Well, I had a contractor bid on some work I would like him to do, and the fellow made a mistake and he has underbid this. But I am going to hold him to it. After all, I’ve got the contract. He signed it and I am going to hold him to it”? That is taking advantage of another’s mistake. We find this spirit coming up so easily when something like that happens. We say, “Oh, that is your hard luck. Finders keepers, losers weepers!” We try to move in and take advantage of another’s distress.

“Oh,” you say, “I could never do a thing like that!” Well, how many of you are on the lookout for some old coin, or some antique chair, or some widow selling her husband’s golf clubs who doesn’t know the value of them? What a bargain! Move in on that and take advantage of it!

Well, this is only a partial listing of the ways of Esau, the man God hates, but the worst thing, the tragedy of Esau, is back in Verse 3, where God says, “The pride of your heart has deceived you.” You are this way, but you don’t know it. Blind to your own problems, you go on thinking that everything is fine, but suddenly everything falls to pieces, just as it did here to Edom (Verses 6-7):

**How Esau has been pillaged,
his treasures sought out!
All your allies have deceived you,
they have driven you to the border;
your confederates have prevailed against
you;
your trusted friends have set a trap under
you –
there is no understanding of it.**
 {Ob 1:6-7 RSV}

That is the terrible thing about pride. It traps us. It tricks us. It trips us up. We don't recognize it until we are too late. We go stumbling along in our pride and arrogance and vanity and we think we are doing fine. Everyone else can see the trouble we are having, but we go blissfully on, sawing away on the limb, totally unaware that the limb we are sawing on is the limb we are sitting on, until it falls down and we are suddenly exposed.

Remember the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*? The emperor advertised throughout his kingdom for a tailor to make him an especially good suit, and a man came and told him he would make him the finest suit that had ever been made. He brought a piece of cloth and showed it to the emperor, only the trouble was, there was nothing there. He held up his hands as though holding a piece of cloth, and he said to the emperor, "You know, this cloth has a really remarkable quality. Only the pure in heart can see it. If you have an evil in your heart, you can't see this cloth, but if your heart is pure, then you can see it. Now, surely, sir, you can see it?" The emperor couldn't see anything, but he nodded his head and said, "What beautiful cloth! What remarkable cloth. That is exactly what I am looking for." And so the man made him a suit from this cloth and he came and put it on him and the poor emperor stood there naked, fancying he had these clothes on. He called his courtiers in to admire him (of course he told them of the special quality of the cloth) and they too said, "Oh my, what a beautiful suit!" No one would admit that he couldn't see a thing until the emperor, in his pride and his vanity, decided to go out to the public streets of the city so everyone could see him. There goes the poor ignorant fellow, strutting along in his nakedness, and the whole city out there admiring him – all but a little boy who stood up and said, "But the emperor doesn't have anything on!"

Now what can you do about this?

This is where we live, isn't it?

We all have this problem of the flesh within. Well, that is not the end of the story (Verses 15-16):

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations.

**As you have done, it shall be done to you,
your deeds shall return on your own head.**

**For as you have drunk upon my holy mountain,
all the nations round about shall drink;
they shall drink, and stagger,
and shall be as though they had not been.**
{Ob 1:15-16 RSV}

In other words, God has determined judgment upon Edom, and there is no escaping it. Does that sound like destruction?

Well, it is – for Esau. There is no hope for Esau; there is no way out. The judgment of God is absolutely inescapable for Esau. God is forever set against him. One of the grandsons of Esau was a man named Amalek, who withstood the Israelites on their way into Canaan. In Exodus 17:14-16 it is recorded that God said to Moses, "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven," {Exod 17:14b RSV}. And Moses says, "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation," {Exod 17:16b RSV}. That is what God is saying about the flesh. He will never make peace with it.

But the day of triumph is for Jacob (Verses 17-18):

But in Mount Zion there shall be those that escape [Mount Zion is Jerusalem, or Jacob],
**and it shall be holy;
and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.**
**The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
and the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau stubble;
they shall burn them and consume them,
and there shall be no survivor to the house of Esau;
for the Lord has spoken.**
{Ob 1:17-18 RSV}

And finally (Verse 21):

**Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion
to rule Mount Esau;
and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.**
{Ob 1:21 RSV}

This is what you might call the ruthlessness of God. He has his heart set to destroy Esau. After all, that is the whole story of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the human heart; he has come to destroy Esau and all these characteristics of the

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flesh. He will destroy them in those who are his and bring Jacob into the full inheritance of all his possessions – and the weapon he uses is the judgment of the cross.

Isn't it interesting that when you get to the New Testament you find these same two principles personified again in two persons who meet in the pages of the Gospels face to face. In the last week of our Lord's sufferings, he stands before Herod. Herod, we are told, is an Idumean, which is another spelling of Edom – he is an Edomite. Jesus before Herod – the representative of Jacob and the representative of Esau face to face. Herod the Edomite, proud, arrogant and rebellious, watches the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they strip the Lord down and dress him in his royal robes. The Gospel writer says that Herod plied him with many questions, but for the son of Esau there is no answer from the son of Jacob. He has nothing to discuss with him. There can be no compromise. God has nothing to say to the flesh, nothing at all except judgment.

And what is the final issue of that account? The prisoner went out to a cross and a grave, and from it he emerged a king; but King Herod went on to disgrace, exile, and, finally, to a grave in a foreign country. Beyond that he is a prisoner, bound by chains of his own making, eternally.

Now which are you? A king, or a prisoner?

Is Esau, or Jacob ruling?

Do you know about this ruthless cross that denies you any right to self-sufficiency, to self-expression, to self-advantage, to self-exploitation, to all these things – denies you indifference, gloating, or self-righteousness?

- Have you learned yet to reign with Christ, not in heaven, but right now?
- Have you learned to possess your possessions – as Jacob is intended to do – so that the kingdom shall be the Lord's, the kingdom of your life?
- Or are you still a prisoner, like Herod,
 - fancying yourself to be free,
 - on a throne in authority,
 - but still bound by unbreakable chains

because you refuse to pass through the death that sets you free?

Prayer:

Our Father, search our hearts in this moment, as we see how vividly this Old Testament illustration sets before us the truth of the New Testament. As we stand face to face with the mirror of your Word, we have seen ourselves. May we not be as those James describes who look in the mirror and see themselves and go their way and straight away forget what manner of men they were. God grant to us the grace to yield to you and to the cross and its judgment upon all the self-life, that we may know the glory of this mighty truth and possess our possessions, so that the kingdom shall be the Lord's. In his name we pray. Amen.

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