

Chapter 53

Obadiah's New Day

"The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head."
Obadiah 15

The descendants of Abraham who had been called by God to bless the nations were living through a terrible national disaster with little hope of recovery. For decades they had been scattered refugees, living in exile far from their homeland. The walls of Jerusalem were broken and the temple destroyed. They had lost much of their identity as a people. Their land was gone, their rituals nearly forgotten, and they were subject to the Persian superpower and the ridicule of surrounding nations. They were a beleaguered minority without much hope of a new day.

Obadiah begins a new phase of Salvation History that leads up to the coming of Christ. The post-exilic prophets, beginning with Obadiah and ending with Malachi, form one long Advent series. Momentum is building for the coming of the Incarnate One. Haggai will focus on building the temple. Zechariah will concentrate on the people's identity and hope through visions and messages. The story of Esther reveals the hand of God in preserving the Jews. Nehemiah will work on building up the walls of Jerusalem and the solidarity of the people. Malachi, God's last word before 400 years of canonical silence, will challenge the people's spiritual apathy and resistance. Once again, God is calling his people out of captivity. God is raising up his people and setting the stage for the coming of the Son of David, the Righteous Branch, the Suffering Servant, and the Son of Man. Israel is in need of a new Exodus. From the ashes of captivity, God will restore his people. The temple will be rebuilt and worship renewed. The law of God re-instituted and the sacrificial system reinstated. The moral order will be reformed and the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt.

However this new day will not have the drama of the first Exodus, with its victorious mass exodus from Egypt. There is no Red Sea miracle. No manna in the wilderness. The refugees will slowly make their way back to Jerusalem and struggle to build a city out of the ruins. Ezra will remind the people of the law of Moses but he does not have the stature of Moses. Nehemiah will fight for his people, but he is no Joshua. Like in the days of Gideon and Samuel, Israel is without a king, waiting for its new king. But somehow this restoration was built to a scale that was particularly well-suited for the Incarnation. The preparations and restorations that took place during this post-exilic period were consistent with God coming like a tender shoot from David's family tree. If God had wanted a superpower and royalty to set the stage for his coming that is what would have happened, but instead God called a poor couple in a poor nation. If God had wanted a throne, there would have been throne, but instead, God chose a manger. The prophet Zechariah warned the people not to "despise the day of small things" (Zech 4:10).

What makes these prophets, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, plus Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah important for Christians living in the 21st century is their invaluable guidance in

spiritual renewal. Everything that is necessary for reviving the church is reinforced by these prophets and sojourners. Their spiritual direction is important for us in setting priorities, reaffirming stewardship, renewing worship, reinvigorating Christian education, and recommitting ourselves to the mission of the church. All of this wisdom and guidance is vitally important in our preparation for the coming of Christ.

Cradle Building

Advent comes around every year and sometimes we have trouble getting into its meaning. We earnestly believe in the truth of Christ's coming, the reality of the Incarnation, the gift of salvation, the power of Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross and the hope of his bodily resurrection. We know all of this is important, and that we should eagerly anticipate Christ's second coming, but our hearts are not in it. We seem distant and detached from these vital truths. This is where the somewhat obscure, often neglected, post-exilic prophets come to our rescue. They give us something unfamiliar to work on that can get us in the mood for Advent. They engage our minds and hearts in new ways that challenge our thinking and stir our souls. They confronted problems, which are similar to ours, but in ways that cause us to rethink our actions. Advent will be more meaningful for us if we can enter into Obadiah's pain and Esther's fear. We will have a greater appreciation for what is at stake in the gospel, if we can feel Ezra's disgrace and Malachi's frustration. So I am asking you to work with me on this, to see if it doesn't deepen our devotion to Christ and motivate us to live for Christ and his Kingdom.

A number of years ago Eugene and Jan Peterson got a call from their son Eric: "Mom, Dad, Lynn's pregnant. We're going to have a baby." Their first child and Eugene and Jan's first grandchild. Within days they were driving the two hours to Princeton Seminary where they were students. Jan was excited, brimming with anticipation. But Eugene wasn't feeling much of anything. They had had three children of their own. He didn't see why this was so special—and there were still six months before they would see the baby. As they got closer to greeting Eric and Lyn, Jan's anticipation heightened, but somehow this pregnancy hadn't penetrated Eugene's emotions. He felt dull, flat, routine.

Driving home the next day, Eugene complained to Jan, 'What's wrong with me? Why don't I feel anything?' Jan said, 'It's because you've never been pregnant.' Eugene said, 'Well that's just great; so what am I going to do about that?' She told him to build a cradle.

So when they got home Eugene went to the public library and found pictures of cradles. He decided on an early American hooded cradle, sketched out plans, went to a speciality woods shop, examined the stock and chose some Honduras mahogany. Most afternoons he came home an hour or so early from his parish duties to his shop and worked on that cradle. He decided to finish it with applications of tung oil. He worked on each piece of the cradle with the finest grade sandpaper, over and over. He then went to fine steel wool, over and over. Each application of tung oil deepened the color; after several applications it seemed like the wood glowed from within. He worked with each piece of the cradle, shaping it, holding it, rubbing it, over and over and over—and all the time anticipating the baby that would be in the cradle, over and over and over.

Jan's prescription worked: He got pregnant. Week after week shaping that cradle, his hands and fingers working the wood, over and over anointing the oil that set the mahogany on fire within, imagining the

developing baby that would soon be swaddled in that cradle, praying in gratitude and anticipation for the life in Lynn's swelling womb. By the time the cradle was ready, he was ready, prepared to receive the gift of new life (edited from Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, 237-8).

We can look at all the work that went into this post-exilic period as God's way of building a cradle for his ultimate revelation. God restored the Jewish people, the Jerusalem temple, the Mosaic law, the Passover, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the walls of Jerusalem, in order to cradle the Incarnate One. And even though everything seems to be on a smaller scale than the first Exodus and there is more struggle and less excitement, anticipation is growing. There is little room for pride of country and race, among a humbled people who are looking to God for mercy and justice. The Promised Land may be less promising than in the days of Moses, but the Promised One is coming and God is at work.

Psalm 137

The most famous hate psalm in the Bible was prayed by the exiles in Babylon. This psalm gives us a window into their souls and helps us understand what it feels like to be in captivity and mocked by your oppressors. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." They couldn't bear to play their instruments and sing their songs, yet their captors sarcastically "demanded songs of joy" and their tormenters mockingly said, "Sing us a happy Zion song!" They couldn't sing their songs but they couldn't forget Jerusalem. They clung to their memory of their homeland: "May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not . . . consider Jerusalem my highest joy."

They split their hate between their Edomite neighbors and their Babylonian captors. "Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!' "And you, Babylonians—ravagers! A reward to whoever gets back at you for all you've done to us; Yes, a reward to the one who grabs your babies and smashes their heads on the rocks!" (Psalm 137, The Message). The last line of the psalm is the most scandalous line in the Bible. Where does anyone get off saying, "Happy are those who seize your infants and dash them against the rocks"?

Of course there are worse ways of dealing with hate than praying it out. We can bury it and allow it to fester. We can try to ignore it and let it infect our soul with bitterness. Or, we can deal with it and present it to God. Every time the exiles thought about Edom they felt angry, so they prayed out their hate. As scandalous as Psalm 137 is, it offers essential spiritual direction. Eugene Peterson writes, ". . . Our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed. Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. It is the volcanic eruption of outrage when the holiness of being, ours or another's, has been violated. . . . But if it is not admitted it can quickly and easily metamorphose into the evil that provokes it; and if it is not prayed we have lost an essential insight and energy in doing battle with evil" (Answering God, 98).

In response to their deep hurt and hate, God gave the Israelites an answer through his prophet Obadiah. The exiles needed a perspective on their Edomite neighbors. Was God deaf to their

prayers? Would the perpetrators of injustice get away scot-free? God's answer to these questions came through the prophet Obadiah. All we know about him is that his name means *Servant of Yahweh*. Before there was any mention made of rebuilding the temple and before the law of God was read in their hearing, Obadiah steps forward and says, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says about Edom." Before Haggai's challenge to rebuild the temple and before Zechariah's identity shaping messages and visions; before Ezra's reforms and Nehemiah's rebuilding project, there was Obadiah's message on judgment. The people of God needed to deal with their hate. Such deep-seated negative emotions needed to be resolved before they could move forward with the restoration. And this is how it is with us, too. Hate has to be resolved. Anger assuaged. We need to know that God has not forgotten us and that in the end evil will be judged and righteousness vindicated.

Obadiah's message was a timely word for the returning exiles and it is a timely word for Christians now. To say that God is holy and just and sovereign over the nations, even though evil runs rampant is met with skepticism by the world. How the world assessed Judah in the fifth century B.C. is not that different from how the world looks upon the church today. "Divine sovereignty is the audacious, historically unlikely theme Obadiah stresses. To all the world around, Judah's weakness must have seemed a mirror of the weakness of Yahweh, surely a subordinate deity who had yielded to the pressure of the stronger gods of Babylon, Edom, and the like" (Leslie Allen, 139). Both in Obadiah's day and in our own "a message from the Lord" must be received by faith.

Edom's Destruction

Although Obadiah's three point message is all about Edom, it was addressed exclusively to Judah. The message was not designed to provoke fear in the Edomites, as much as to create hope in the exiles. Obadiah was not trying to warn Edom; he was trying to comfort Judah. Part one describes Edom's downfall (1-10). Obadiah implies that the sovereign Lord has ordered the surrounding nations to bring Edom down. In spite of her physical elevation and nearly impenetrable natural fortress Edom was going to be brought down. She could make her home in the clefts of the rock and soar like an Eagle, but she was still coming down. Her fate was worse than being robbed, because at least thieves take only what they want, and harvesters usually leave a few grapes on the vine, but Edom was going to be picked clean. Her allies would deceive her, her wise men would be destroyed, and her warriors would be slaughtered. God's verdict was as decisive as it was devastating: "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever."

Part two describes Edom's descent (11-14) and explains why Edom deserved this catastrophic judgment. There was an historic legacy of rivalry and animosity, dating back to the Patriarchs, between the Edomites, Esau's descendants, and the exiles of Judah, the descendants of Jacob (Gen 25-29; 32). The struggle between two brothers had grown into a conflict between nations. They were born only moments apart, twin brothers, who were driven apart by a complex array of sins. Jacob defrauded Esau of his birthright, which Esau had bartered away for Jacob's home made stew. Esau "despised" his birthright and married a Hittite woman, causing grief to Isaac

and Rebekiah (Gen 25:34; 27:34). Jacob robbed the “blessing” from Isaac and fled from Esau to save his life. Centuries of compounded hate led to the events of the summer of 587 BC when the besieging Babylonians finally overran Jerusalem, burned the temple and carried off the Judeans into exile. Instead of showing concern, the Edomites cheered. First they stood aloof, then they gloated over their “brother’s misfortune.” Their gloating turned to rejoicing “over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction.” Looting followed boasting, as the Edomites ransacked the city the Babylonians had destroyed. The Edomites even stood guard at the crossroads to capture Judean survivors and to turn them over to the Babylonians. It was bad enough that the Babylonians did what they did, but the callous ridicule, boastful betrayal, and greedy opportunism by the Edomites was more grief than Obadiah could bear. In their day of distress, Esau’s descendants showed their true colors.

Part three describes Edom’s destiny (15-18). Having pronounced judgment on Edom and described her crime, Obadiah turns to the big picture. “The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your head.” All the nations will be forced to drink and drink of the wrath of the Lord (Psalm 75:8; 60:3; Isa 51:22). The destruction of Edom is part of the larger picture of God’s judgment of the nations. Mount Zion stands for deliverance and the house of Jacob will possess its inheritance. The house of Joseph will set on fire the house of Esau and it will be consumed. The final word belongs to the Lord: “There will be no survivors from the house of Esau.”

The Day of the Lord

Obadiah’s new day is a day of vindication and victory; it is the day of the Lord. The reference to “day” unites the three parts of this message. Part one ends by definitively declaring the day of the Lord. The Lord declares, “In that day, will I not destroy the wise in Edom . . .” Part three begins with the immediacy of the day of the Lord. “The day of the Lord is near for all the nations.” In between part one and three, there are eight references to the “day” the Edomites stood by and watched their brother Jacob suffer. This “day” is referred to four different ways, as the day of misfortune, the day of destruction, the day of disaster, and the day of trouble. The important message here is that the truth of the day of the Lord frames our understanding of the day of trouble. God is sovereign and in spite of the prevailing circumstances God will prevail. Ten references to “day” symbolize the completeness of history and the limited duration of human suffering. The days of destruction and trouble will cease and the judgment and salvation of the day of the Lord will commence.

Obadiah’s message wrestles openly with the real problem of evil. Any form of spirituality that leaves you with a generic sense of good will, plastic smiles and a cheery feeling toward everybody is probably not worth much. If you have no enemies, you are doing something wrong. The gospel tells us that people love the darkness instead of the light because their deeds are evil and that they will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed (John 3:19-20). Real prayer is filled with enemy talk, because “prayer is combat” (Peterson, Answering God, 95). Before the presence of God, we struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Through prayer we put on the full armor of God, “so that we can take [our] stand against the devil’s strategies” (Eph 6:11-12).

If we refuse to acknowledge and deal with evil we frustrate those who look to us for help. We risk losing their respect and trust, and even worse, they may succumb to the forces of evil. Dave was a student in my suburban youth group in the mid-seventies, who came up with ingenious ways of expressing his dislike for me. I wondered why he kept coming to the youth group, when all he wanted to do was mock other students and cause me grief. The night he painted my car headlights orange I found out. Although it was late, I called his parents and said we had to meet. By the time I got over to his house, Dave was in a rage. He dramatically ripped off his shirt and was stomping around the living room bare-chested and shouting at his parents. His father and mother sat there cowering, seemingly at wits end, not knowing how to deal with their son. My refrain for about thirty minutes had been, “Dave, what is troubling you?” When he finally calmed down and sat down, he began to share what was troubling him. For months he had been threatened by an older boy who demanded money from Dave’s paper route. If Dave didn’t pay up on a weekly basis, the bully threatened to beat him up. Delivering newspapers had become dangerous. I was stunned when he said that his parents knew all about this extortion but had done nothing about it. Instead of defending their son and confronting the bully, their response was to tell Dave to pray about it. They used prayer as a convenient spiritual excuse for not dealing with evil.

Obadiah’s ancient prophecy offers us a different perspective. Evil is identified and confronted. A verdict is reached and judgment is pronounced. Obadiah is all over the Edomite issue, which goes a long way in reassuring the exiles that God is sovereign and justice will win out. Instead of denying their hate or suppressing their anger, Obadiah confronts it head on and brings resolution to their damaged emotions and nagging fears.

Obadiah’s message is consistent with New Testament teaching on judgment. Jesus had a great deal to say about the judgment to come. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus said. “Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28). This is consistent with the teaching of the early church. The apostle Paul wrote, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness. . .” (Rom 1:18). To warn people of the wrath of God is perfectly consistent with loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. For a surgeon to ignore the cancer that is killing his patient is malpractice. Similarly for Christians to ignore the consequences that come from rejecting God’s grace and mercy is in itself sinful.

Obadiah’s message confirms that sin is sin. He dispels any thought that Edom wasn’t as bad as Babylon because they were not the dominating, conquering force. Like the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side in Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan, the Edomites stood condemned. They stood aloof, indifferent to the plight of their Judean neighbors. The Babylonian army besieged the city while the Edomites gloated and boasted. The Babylonians were the first to conquer Jerusalem but the Edomite looters were the last to leave the city. The lesson of

Edom is that God takes passive evil seriously and condemns the opportunist bystander just as much as the initial perpetrator.

In the end however it must be stressed that Obadiah doesn't give us the last word. None of the postexilic prophets and narratives have the last word. Israel's vindication over the Edomites, right along with resettling the land, rebuilding the temple, and re-instating the sacrificial system, are all in anticipation of the coming of Christ. Obadiah does not give us the last word on Esau's descendants, although he does hint at it in his last paragraph. The exiles are going to return from distant lands and possess the land. The mountains of Esau will be populated by the people of God. "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom's will be the Lord's." We could see this simply as a description of territorial expansionism or we could see this as God's Kingdom embracing Philistines, Samaritans, Phoenicians, and Edomites. Mount Zion and the mountains of Esau will be ruled by God's justice. "The last line of the prophecy takes a giant step out of the centuries of hate and rivalry and invective," writes Eugene Peterson. "Israel, so often a victim of Edomite aggression through the centuries, is suddenly revealed to be saved from the injustices of the past and taking up a position of rule over their ancient enemies the Edomites. But instead of doing to others what had been done to them and continuing the cycle of violence that they had been caught in, they were presented as taking over the reins of government and administering God's justice justly. They find themselves in a new context—God's kingdom—and realize that they have a new vocation—to represent God's rule" (The Message, 494).