

Followers of the Way

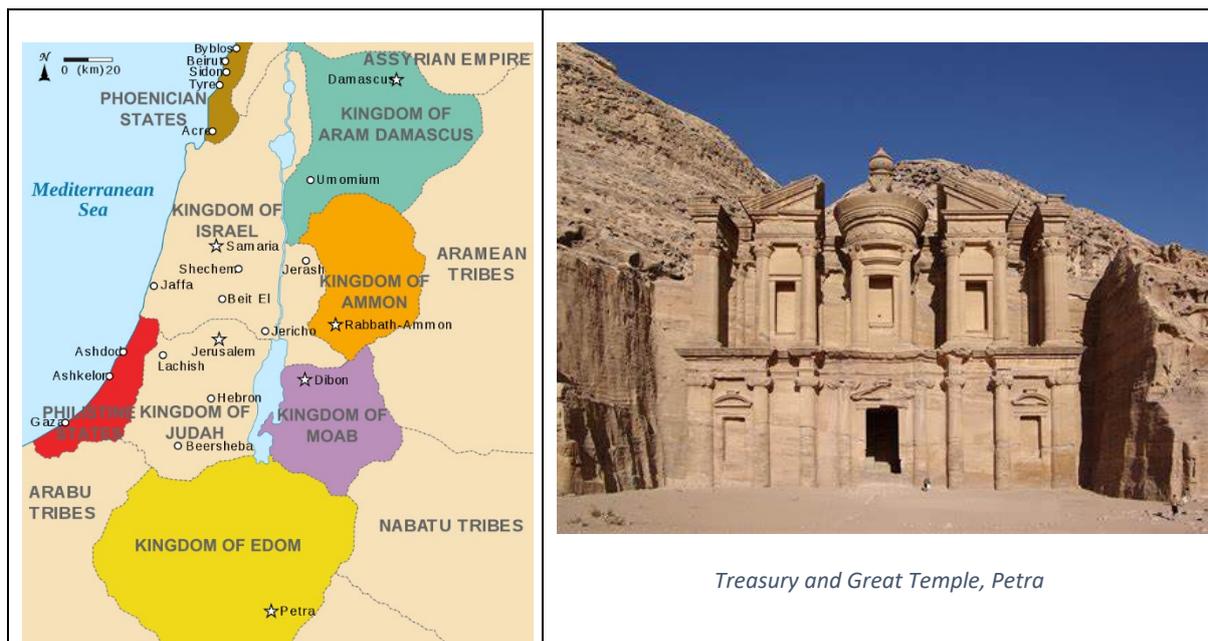
Sermon: 9th January 2022

Preacher: Philip Quenby

Obadiah 1

Before we get into this message from Obadiah, we need to orientate ourselves in time, place and people groups. The prophet is preaching against a backdrop of the nation of Edom failing to help the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah when that country was attacked. Edom didn't just stay neutral, but gleefully took a hand in Judah's downfall, as we've just heard. Most scholars agree these events took place in the context of successive Babylonian invasions of Judah under Nebuchadnezzar, ending with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. That would make Obadiah a contemporary of Jeremiah. And, sure enough, there are parallels between Obadiah 1:1-9 and Jeremiah 49:7-22.¹

Geographically, we're looking at territory south of the Dead Sea. Though this isn't heavily populated now, in the past, it's been home to vibrant civilisations. At the bottom of the map, you can see Petra marked, where the later Nabatean kingdom built incredible monuments carved out of the solid rock.



Treasury and Great Temple, Petra

As for people groups, this is family business. Edomites were blood relatives of the Israelites, because they were offspring of Esau, twin brother of Jacob (Israel²), from whom the Jews descend. Since Esau had red hair, he was nicknamed Edom (meaning, red): see Genesis 25:30.

This family dynamic gives an added twist to what Obadiah says, and the punishment God visits on Edom for what she does. But what's described here also applies to the behaviour of nations generally,

¹ See also Lamentations 4:21-22, Psalm 137:7, Isaiah 34:9, Isaiah 63:1-6.

² God renamed Jacob "Israel" after the encounter at Peniel "because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28).

and shows both the operation divine Providence and how God will treat national sin. These are what I want to concentrate on today.

Obadiah lists a number of specific charges against Edom, falling into four broad categories: (1) pride and puffing themselves up in their dealings with God; (2) allying themselves with God's enemies; (3) being unprincipled in diplomacy and aggressive in the way they wage war; (4) failing to support and stand with Judah. As we examine these, we'll see there's a progression at work, with Edom's wrong stance towards God leading inexorably to wrong actions towards God's chosen people (the Israelites), these together bringing about a hardness of heart that sets the nation firmly on the path to judgment.

Puffing ourselves up

Edom's internal attitude of pride causes skewed thinking, which translates into an outward stance of rejecting God. The internal attitude of:

(1) a prideful *nature* – “pride of heart” (Obadiah 1:3) = taking pride in who and what we are, though it's God who made us so, refusing to acknowledge that our cleverness and strength were given by God in the first place.

and

(2) prideful *independence* of God – “who can bring me down to the ground?” (Obadiah 1:3) = making the fatal mistake of thinking we can outrun, outwit or outdo God, that we're answerable to no-one for what we do.

... expresses itself in a skewed mentality or wrong orientation through:

(3) prideful *reliance* on the things of this world – “hidden treasures” (Obadiah 1:6) = trusting in what we've stored up for ourselves out of the earth's supply, forgetting that God is the ultimate source of all provision.

and

(4) prideful *trust* in “wise men ... [and] men of understanding” (Obadiah 1:8) = assuming we can plan and strategise in ways that will always get us out of trouble, imagining science and technology give the only answers we need.

... which in turn manifests outwardly through:

(5) Prideful *positioning* – “clefts of the rocks ... heights ... [and] mountains” (Obadiah 1:3-4 and 1:9) = the belief that we can position ourselves to be impregnable, overlooking the inescapable reality that God will always find us out, no matter where and no matter what.

and

(6) Prideful *defences* – the “warriors [of] Teman” (Obadiah 1:9) = thinking a nation's security lies in the number of its troops or quality of its hardware, whilst ignoring the LORD of Hosts who can breach all fortifications and overcome all opposition.

Allying with God's enemies

Obadiah doesn't say specifically that the Edomites have turned away from the one true God, but we know from elsewhere in the Bible that polytheism and the worship of false deities was widespread in their land: "When [Israelite king] Amaziah returned from slaughtering the Edomites, he brought back the gods of the people of Seir. He set them up as his own gods, bowed down to them and burned sacrifices to them." (2 Chronicles 25:14).

Sooner or later, wrong spiritual alliances will play out in wrong alliances in the physical world, too. To put it another way, ungodly alliances reflect ungodliness in the nation, since they can only happen when attitudes of heart and mind are wrong. Edom has made ungodly alliances in the natural realm – the "allies" and "friends" of Obadiah 1:7 – that are an outworking of its wrongful allegiances to pagan idols. These allies prove false friends, of course, and soon take their chance to turn on Edom, but for a while this evil confederacy is held together by the lure of plunder from Judah.

At bottom, false alliances are rooted in enmity towards God, and rejection of His plans and purposes. Enmity towards God will mean enmity towards His people (Israel and the Church), His Word and His laws. Edom has allied herself with God's enemies, and that's not a good place to be.

Unprincipled diplomacy and aggressive war

Edom's downward spiral sees her behave deviously, intriguing against Judah with other nations so she becomes "like one of them ... [as they] cast lots for Jerusalem" (Obadiah 1:11). Edom first gloats over Judah's fate (Obadiah 1:12), "[standing] aloof while strangers carried off [her brother Jacob's] wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem" (Obadiah 1:11). Then she joins in the destruction in "the day of their disaster" (a phrase repeated three times in Obadiah 1:13) – to "seize wealth ... cut down fugitives ... [and] hand over ... survivors" (Obadiah 1:13-14).

There's a complete lack of pity for a fallen nation (Obadiah 1:12-13). All these are things the prophet tells them, again with threefold repetition, "[you] should not [do]" (Obadiah 1:13-14).

Failing to stand with Judah

With the sureness and inevitability of divine law, antagonism towards God's covenant people brings into play the LORD's promise to Abraham and his descendants, to "bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." (Genesis 12:3).

This universal principle doesn't only extend to Edom and hasn't ceased to apply in the present: "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. Just as you drank on my holy hill, so all the nations will drink continually; they will drink and drink and be as if they had never been." (Obadiah 1:15-16, emphasis added).

Nations that are on the wrong side are facing destruction as swift and total as that which befell Edom.

Providence and judgment

God has a plan that will not be thwarted: "on Mount Zion [there] will be deliverance; it will be holy, and the house of Jacob will possess its inheritance. The house of Jacob will be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame." (Obadiah 1:17). Jewish exiles will return to the land (Obadiah 1:20) and "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the LORD's." (Obadiah 1:21).

The LORD brings about His plans through the mechanisms of Providence – that's to say, by directing people and the created order so as to fulfil His purposes. The Bible tells us that God "makes nations great, and he destroys them: he enlarges nations, and leads them away" (Job 12:23). It affirms that,

“Dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations” (Psalm 22:28). (The fact that God does these things doesn’t lessen human free Will, but that’s a discussion for another time.)

Divine Providence decrees the destruction of Edom. The enemies coming against her are summoned by God himself. We know this is so because it’s “a message from the LORD [which records that]: “An envoy was sent to the nations to say, ‘Rise, and let us go against her for battle’” (Obadiah 1:1).

When God executes judgment, it’s always just and proportionate: the punishment really does fit the crime. Edom will be made “small among the nations ... [and] utterly despised” (Obadiah 1:2) just as Judah has been brought low. She will be “ransacked ... [and] pillaged” (Obadiah 1:6) as she has done. Her territory will be overrun and her people go into exile: “All your allies will force you to the border; your friends will deceive and overpower you; those who eat your bread will set a trap for you, but you will not detect it.” (Obadiah 1:7). She’ll experience the same brutality she’s displayed: “Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever.” (Obadiah 1:10).

The calamity Edom faces isn’t bad luck or random happenstance. It goes beyond anything that would come about through the ordinary operation of events: “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?” (Obadiah 1:5). Those who mock God, take heed.

Not long after Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar, desert nomads began moving into Edomite territory in large numbers, exactly as Obadiah predicted: “People from the Negev will occupy the mountains of Esau” (Obadiah 1:19). The Edomites were progressively forced out, and in an exquisite irony had to seek refuge in the southern regions of Judea, where they mingled with the local population and ceased to exist as an identifiable people group.³ Today, “There [are] no survivors from the house of Esau.” (Obadiah 1:18).

Our own nation

This isn’t a tale we can dismiss lightly as being about a faraway land and long ago, with no relevance to our own lives. Many of the charges levelled against Edom could be made against us – not in some distant past, but right here and now. Like them, prideful attitudes have skewed our thinking. We, too, are characterised by outright rejection of God, the making of ungodly alliances and acting with wrong motives. At times in our history, we may have been a sheep nation, but today we’re more likely to be found among the goats. Unless we move quickly to change our direction of travel, we’ll find ourselves meeting the same fate as Edom.

What can believers do to help change this narrative and see God’s purposes fulfilled in our land? We have to start by being honest. The sins and failings of the nation have come about because of the sins and failings of the Church. The Church has imagined it can redefine God, play fast and loose with the Scriptures and use the world to critique the Bible rather than vice versa. This must stop. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10) and “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” (Proverbs 1:7). A deep and radical fear of the LORD needs to overtake His people, so they can communicate the reality of judgment to an unbelieving nation, for “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:31).

³ This area became known as Idumea, the region from which Herod the Great came. One reason his subjects regarded him with suspicion was that, as an Idumean, he wasn’t considered properly Jewish.

We need to turn away from our wrong alliances and repent of our failure to stand with God's covenant people, Israel. The falsehoods of Replacement Theology – the idea that the Church has replaced Israel entirely in God's plans – are widely accepted. They must be confronted and rejected. We're grafted into the root of the spiritual olive tree of Israel, and it's time we started to act like it. There's still time to turn, but we're at a few minutes to midnight. Pray for the Church to arise into her true calling. Pray for God's mercy on the nation. Pray for a great move of the fear of the LORD to fall.