

God's Enemies. God's Friends.

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[0 : 00] Please take a seat. I'll begin by praying for us.

O Lord, our God, we thank you so much for your word. We thank you for its diversity and richness. We thank you for the books that we know well and those that we don't read enough. We pray that as we read this little book of the Old Testament, you'll open our eyes to see the truths that you want to teach us from it.

Please help me to preach clearly and faithfully. Please help us to remember and take to heart the things that point to you, your son, your people and your salvation so that we can serve you more effectively.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. I like Jesus, but I don't like the church. I believe in God, but I don't believe in organised religion.

It's religious people that pose the greatest threat to our society and our liberties. It's a familiar theme for us today, isn't it?

[1 : 16] Whatever people might think of God, the people in our society haven't got much time for the church. If you listen to those who make opinions in this country, then the received wisdom is that the Christian church is hypocritical and oppressive and on its way out.

And that's a good thing. The sooner religion fades, the sooner we can move into a happier age of tolerance and personal freedom. Well, today we are about to meet a people who would have largely agreed with this sentiment, namely the Edomites or the descendants of Esau.

The sad irony for the Edomites, of course, is that they should have been the people of God. It was Esau who was born ahead of Jacob and who then, therefore at least theoretically, was the heir of the birthright, the promises of Abraham and Isaac.

But as you'll recall from Genesis 25, Esau sold that right to his brother Jacob for a pot of stew. And later there was another opportunity for Esau's descendants.

When the Israelites fled from Egypt, God forbade the Israelites from making war against their cousins. They were to pass through Esau's territory peacefully, paying for any food or water that they might drink or eat.

[2 : 50] As God tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy 2, verse 4, you are about to pass through the territory of your brothers, the descendants of Esau who live at Seir. They will be afraid of you, but be very careful.

Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. Here then was another opportunity for a bond of unity and hospitality.

Esau's folk might have welcomed their lost cousins or at least allowed them to pass peacefully. But that was never Edom style.

If there was a national characteristic of the descendants of Esau, it was missing opportunities. The same line that sold its right to be the people of God would in the end culminate in that most famous of Edomites, Herod the Great, who when presented with the news of the Messiah's birth, proceeded to try and kill him.

Here again, in the Exodus, Edom sent out soldiers against their relatives. Rather than friendship, there was instead a long history of rivalry and bloodshed.

[4 : 09] Edom to the south of Israel, sending out armies from its mountain kingdom, south of the Dead Sea, and Judah projecting its power south from Jerusalem.

For around 200 years from the time of David, Judah ruled over Edom and subjected it to tribute. Yet by the time that Obadiah is delivering this prophecy, it seems that this is all well behind us.

The kingdom of Israel has been all but obliterated. The northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians around 150 years ago. And the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem has just recently fallen to the forces of Babylon.

At this point in history, somewhere around 586 BC, the rivalry between Jacob and Esau appears to be over, simply because Jacob no longer exists.

Esau alone remains, secure in his mountain strongholds, looking north, down on the smoking ruins of his upstart brother. And how sweet it must have been for the Edomites.

[5 : 23] Jacob, the one who tricked Esau out of his birthright, and blessings, is no more. Centuries of harsh rule and conflict have come to an end.

All those pretentious prophecies about the Israelite God and the Israelite kings have been trampled into the dust by the soldiers of Babylon. The Edomites did what they could to help things along.

In Psalm 137, probably written at a similar time to the prophecies of Obadiah, the psalmist tells us of their involvement. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, tear it down, tear it down, down to its foundations.

Obadiah gives us an even fuller picture in verses 11 to 14. When the foreigners broke through the defences of Jerusalem, the Edomites were there in the background, crowing over her defeat, looting her possessions, rounding up the refugees at the crossroads and handing them over to the Babylonians.

Small though they were, compared to the great superpower, Edom was keen to seize its opportunity to help put an end to its old rival. But the message of Obadiah is that the story is not over yet.

[6 : 51] In the opening verses, God is presented as a great emperor, indeed, like the emperor of Babylon himself, who sends out messengers to rally the nations and kings under his power.

Except now the subject of the attack is not Judah, but those who have assaulted her. Edom is high on his list. God is determined to humiliate and expose the pride of Esau and all those things Esau relies on.

The inaccessibility of his mountains, cities and fortresses will not prevent God's vassals from climbing up and pulling him down. Verse 4, Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord.

The caves and crevices will not conceal his wealth. Verse 6, How Esau has been pillaged, his treasures searched out. His political alliances will betray him.

Verse 7, All your allies have deceived you. They have driven you to the border. Your confederates have prevailed against you. Those who ate your bread have set a trap for you. And his wise men will be unable to help.

[8 : 09] Verse 8, On that day, says the Lord, I will destroy the wise out of Edom and understanding out of Mount Esau. The reason for this punishment is very clear.

As verse 10 states, It is because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you and you shall be cut off forever. Behind this is a slightly more subtle reason though.

Because the descendants of Jacob are God's people and the Edomites of all people should know this, any attack on them is actually an attack on God himself.

Similarly, because God has chosen to make Jerusalem the place of his temple and presence, any assault on Mount Zion, the mountain of the Lord, is an assault on God.

Thus we read in verses 15 and 16 that God is going to judge not only Esau but all the nations according to how they have acted toward Jerusalem. For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations.

[9 : 15] As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head. Turning to the survivors of Jerusalem, he says, For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, all the nations around you shall drink.

They shall drink and gulp down and shall be as though they had never been. So a day is coming, Obadiah says, when God will pay back the nations of the world with perfect justice.

What they have done to him by attacking his holy mountain will be done back to them. As they have forced the people of Jerusalem to drink from the metaphorical cup of wrath or judgment, so they too will drink from that same cup.

As they have tried to annihilate God's people, they too will be as if they have never been. This is a grim warning for any who encounter God's people.

And it is a warning that stands today. For if God's judgment on the nations is based on how they respond to those things and people that represent him, then the pattern applies even more to how we respond to his son, Jesus Christ, the one who most fully represents God, who most perfectly conveys to us God's message and meaning and intent and character.

[10 : 46] This is why when we read the Gospels we find Jesus saying things again and again like, whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.

or my teaching is not my own, it comes from him who sent me or anyone who does not honour the son does not honour the father who sent him. So if you are not a Christian and you are here today, the first question that you need to be asking is how you are going to respond to Jesus.

Are you going to accept him as God's ultimate representative? Have you looked closely at him and listened to his claims in the Gospels? Jesus is to us as Jerusalem was to Edom, the point at which God will hold us accountable.

The great need for us is not to be like the Edomites, not to miss the opportunity that we have now to find out about Jesus, to respond to him. For the rest of us, there is another challenge.

If we belong to Jesus, then our response to him is not simply private or intellectual. It will be expressed also in our attitude to his people.

[12 : 07] For the church represents Christ in a similar but even fuller way than Jerusalem and Judah represent God in the Old Testament. This is why in Acts chapter 9 verse 4 as Saul of Tarsus is riding to Damascus to persecute the church, Jesus appears to him and says, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

This is why that same Saul, now the apostle Paul, later warns the Corinthian Christians to be very careful how they act toward the church because he knows that their service toward God's people will determine how God treats them on the day of judgment.

On Corinthians chapter 3 verse 16 and 17 he says, do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person for God's temple is holy and you are that temple.

And we saw in our second reading today from Matthew chapter 25 that this same pattern applies to individuals too. Truly I tell you, just as you cared for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me, Jesus says, to those he welcomes into his eternal dwelling.

And conversely, truly I tell you, just as you did not care for the least of these, you did not do it for me, he says, to those who go away to eternal punishment.

[13 : 40] Jesus represents himself through his church as God represents himself through Judah and Jerusalem. So the prophecies of Obadiah have a very real and possibly scary application for us today.

Just as God will hold the nations accountable for how they have acted toward his temple and his holy people, so we will be judged according to how we have responded to Jesus and his holy people.

Just as this came as a shock to the Edomites who thought they were safe in their mountains, so this final day of the Lord will come as a shock to us if we presume that God won't care too much about how we have responded to Jesus or treated fellow believers.

But mercifully, there are also some good surprises here too. Obadiah's warnings to the nations are paralleled with encouragements to the struggling remnant of God's people who are living under occupation in a time of God's judgment.

There isn't much to cheer the descendants of Jacob at this point in their history. Their land has been captured and resettled by foreigners. Their capital has been besieged and sacked.

[14 : 57] Their young men are either dead or enslaved in foreign countries. Women have been raped, children butchered, kings and officials long gone.

Perhaps worst of all, the temple, that great symbol of God's presence amongst them has been burned to the ground. To all appearances, things have gone beyond the point of no return.

And yet, it is at this moment that God has great promises for his people. As verses 17 to 21 make clear, they will survive.

On Mount Zion there shall be those that escape and it will be holy. All the losses and suffering inflicted on Judah will be reversed.

Edom, which had participated in the fiery destruction of Jerusalem and Jacob and had annexed Judah's southern territories in the Negev, will now itself be burned and possessed by survivors from those territories.

[16 : 01] Other Jewish survivors will reclaim their territory to the north, as far as Zarephath in Lebanon. West, across the Jordan into Gilead. East, into Philistia and Ephraim.

The overall picture is of a united Israel that extends to all the boundaries of the territory that was ever promised to them in the Exodus or possessed in their history.

It is probably wisest, however, not to read this geographic picture too literally. God is here offering his people an image of the future that is magnificent according to their expectations and circumstances.

But even this great restoration is dwarfed by the promises that we find elsewhere. From other Old Testament prophecy we know that in the final scheme of things the kingdom of God will extend to every corner of the world.

Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession, says God to the king of Israel in Psalm 2 verse 8. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, says Isaiah 11 verse 9.

[17 : 14] In the wider picture of both Old and New Testaments the scope of God's ultimate plan for his kingdom is global. But for now perhaps mere survival is the greatest miracle.

It is said that the great Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal was once asked by Louis XIV for evidence of miracles. Without a moment's hesitation Pascal responded, why the Jews, your majesty?

The Jews. It was an excellent point. If you look at a map of the world, of the Middle East, you will be hard pressed to find any of the countries that surrounded Judah of this time, Israel of this time and made war on her.

There is no Edom, no Assyria, no Babylonia, no Moab, no Philistia. Within a hundred years of the fall of Jerusalem, each had sunk into the swamp of time and history.

And yet the Jews would survive, just as God promised in Obadiah. they would survive not only this invasion but many others. By the Greeks, the Romans, the Turks, the Crusaders.

[18 : 37] They would survive successive attempts to eradicate their religion. They would withstand repeated attempts to wipe them off the face of the earth. And of course they are with us today.

Romans 11 makes clear that they are still God's chosen people. History awaits with bated breath for the day when they will turn back to God and accept Jesus as their Messiah.

In the meantime, however, this same durability attends the church, also God's people. Here too is a people whose destruction has been planned and predicted time after time by pagans, by Muslim conquerors, by Marxist ideologues, by scientific rationalists.

She's been relentlessly attacked from without, by persecution, from within, by heresy, schism, scandal. The church in some countries has all but died out and yet in other places suddenly flares and spreads uncontrollably.

As British author Os Guinness puts it, Christianity is history's eternal jack-in-the-box. No power on earth can finally keep it down, not even the power of Babylonian confusion and captivity.

[19 : 55] Or in similar words from G.K. Chesterton, at least five times in history the faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died.

And what is the reason for these miracles of history? Clearly not the great virtue of God's people, nor is it their intellectual superiority, nor clever planning, nor wisdom, though God in his mercy may raise up people with those characteristics to save his people.

The answer lies in the last line of Obadiah. The kingdom shall be the Lord's. God's people stand and rise to their feet again and again, not because of any characteristic or quality that makes them worthy, but because God has chosen them and God is working his purposes out through them.

Despite all appearances, history is not in the hands of humanity. Through the rise and wreck of kingdoms and civilisations, God the true emperor is achieving his purposes, building a kingdom for himself that will one day stretch from east to west, from north to south.

He is gathering a people who will belong to his son and live with him forever. He is calling us to serve as his people, to help build his temple with acts that will echo into eternity.

[21 : 39] Saviour since of Zion city, I through grace a member am. Let the world deride or pity, I will glory in your name. Fading are the world's best pleasures, all its boasted pomp and show.

Solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know. Amen.