

Judgment on the Nations

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 12th of May 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Judgment on the Nations and is based on Obadiah verses 1 to 15. And you may find it helpful to have open the passage from Obadiah.

Let me tell you it's page 750 because it's not easy to find. And I'll pray for us as we begin.

God, we recognise that for centuries you have spoken to this world through your prophets and others. And we give you thanks that you have revealed yourself to us and that not only spoken then but your word preserved for us and that through it you still speak to us.

Give us ears to hear and hearts to obey. We pray this morning for Jesus' sake. Amen. Wherever we turn in our world it seems the blast of war blows in our ears.

[1 : 20] There's simmering Saharan unrest in the Sudan. There's niggling Nigerian conflicts. Constant Kashmiri clashes. Belfast bomb blasts.

And the West Bank war seems to wage fiercer every day. But in our world today, top of the list, is still the war against Islamic terror.

September 11th has reminded us that at the heart of so many of the conflicts of our world lies a religious factor.

Not always, and more often than not, the key factor is greed and land, but religion is often an important factor in so many of these wars.

It's tempting, I think, as Christians to retreat into a cosy, privatised faith where our faith is kept within the confines of our house and our church building, is involved in our private or Sunday corporate prayers and praises, but that's it.

[2 : 27] It's a domain that is private and personal. But the fact is that matters of faith and religion and God are on display on the world stage every day.

And the issues of faith and religion are not just to be confined to our private lives, but are actually part and parcel of the world in which we live and must live as Christian people.

And as we survey the bewildering array of wars and conflicts in our world, in almost every part of the world and continent of the world, we surely often ask, where is God in this confusing chaos?

What is God doing, if anything, in this world in which we live? Where is God active, if anywhere at all?

What is God doing? What is God doing? What is God doing? And what is God doing? And what is He saying to this world and to the nations of our world where so often issues of faith and religion are uppermost in the battles that are being fought?

[3 : 38] The tiny book of Obadiah in the Old Testament, the smallest book of the Old Testament, is a rare book in the Bible, not just for its size. It's rare because primarily it comes across as a book that is addressed fundamentally to a pagan nation, though not exclusively so, as we'll see next week in the second half.

It addresses a sad and chaotic international scene, as is our own today. And so it's an appropriate book to look at and reflect on what sort of things is God doing and saying in the world of international affairs, of pagan nations and the nations of God's people and so on.

What's God saying? What's He doing in that sort of world? Well, the problem began with twins. Twins are often a problem. I'd better be careful because I know there's at least one twin here today.

In 1900 BC, thereabouts, twins were born. The parents' names were Isaac and Rebecca. We read about them in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis.

And their twins were two boys, Esau the elder, Jacob the younger. But even before they were born, their mother was worried about what was happening because it wasn't just the case that when they were born they fought, though they did, but even in the womb there was a tussle between them.

[5 : 10] She inquires of the Lord before they were born. If it's to be this way, why do I live? Because she felt the struggle of these twins within her. And the Lord said to her, Two nations are in your womb.

Two peoples born of you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other. However, the elder shall serve the younger. The twins are born.

The elder is Esau. The younger is Jacob. Esau is to serve Jacob, was that word from the Lord. And in the life of these twins as they grew up, Jacob the younger deceived and tricked his elder brother Esau of both his birthright and his blessing.

And so as the story continues, Jacob acquires wealth, wives, many sons, and from him the nation of Israel comes into being.

It dwells ultimately in the promised land, a land of milk and honey. And wealth and prosperity, at least for a time, belongs to it. But for Esau was reserved this blessing from his father.

[6 : 20] Away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother.

Esau. But when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck. Esau did not dwell in the promised land nor his descendants. They dwelt to the south and the east of the Dead Sea in fairly inhospitable country, hardly a country you would describe as flowing with milk and honey.

About 500 years later, 1400 BC, give or take a bit, the people of Israel descended from the youngest son, Jacob, had left their slavery in Egypt through the leadership of Moses and the plagues that God brought against Pharaoh and after nearly 40 years in the wilderness wanted to pass through the land of the descendants of Esau, called the nation of Edom, on their way to the promised land.

Edom refused passage, they went alongside but they were told by God not to fight against Edom because Edom was protected by God and given its land by him. They enter the land, they conquer the land, they settle in the land.

Another 400 years later, 1000 BC, give or take a little bit, the first king of Israel is on the throne, Saul by name and he fought against the Edomites without great success but his successor, the great King David, just after 1000 BC, defeated the Edomites and brought them under the rule of Jerusalem and King David and his son, King Solomon, the greatest of the kings as far as territory wealth and prestige went, kept them and exploited the nation of Edom under the control of his kingdom.

[8 : 12] But in the next century, in the 800s BC, Edom finally broke away from an Israel that was becoming weaker and had already become divided in itself and regained its independence.

And for the years and decades that followed, Edom was a constant enemy of the people of God of Israel and Judah constantly fighting border skirmishes and wars between each other.

The low point of the people of God's history, the people of Israel and Judah's history, came in 586 BC when the mighty Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem, laid siege to it, destroyed it, brought its temple down and carted off its leaders and wealthy citizens into exile in Babylon, leaving Jerusalem and its countryside around it in basic desolation and ruin.

At that time, when Babylon was slaughtering the people of Israel and Judah, Edom stood on the sidelines and cheered wildly and applauded and helped out in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Obadiah addresses the aftermath of those events. He castigates Edom's collusion with Babylon in destroying the people of God. He pledges that Edom will get its comeuppance from God and Obadiah looks forward to the final day of the Lord when not only will the enemies of God be brought down, but God's own people restored as well.

[9 : 56] We must remember that at the time that Obadiah speaks these words of God, not Obadiah's own creation, words that God himself spoke to the people through Obadiah, at the time that Obadiah relays these words to Edom and to Israel, it seemed that the God of the Bible had been defeated because in the ancient world when country A defeats country B, the gods of country A are regarded as having defeated the gods of country B.

So, when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, which after all was the dwelling place of the God of Israel, it was regarded that the gods of Babylon, Baal and Nebo and Marduk and others, had defeated Yahweh, the Lord, the God of the Bible and that he was gone no more in defeat, not just even in exile.

So, when Obadiah proclaims this is the word of the Lord and this is what God is going to do, it's a rather audacious pronouncement because he's speaking into a world in which it seems that God is gone, defeated, impotent, powerless and he's saying nonetheless that God is sovereign, that he reigns despite the appearances of the international scene, despite defeat, he's saying.

God is sovereign and Edom on the sidelines may be smug and gloating about the destruction of Israel, its brother from whom it's been estranged for centuries but he says to Edom, watch out, stop your gloating, watch out because God is raising up a coalition to defeat you.

They're the opening words, the vision of Obadiah, we're told, though it's more a vision of words than pictures and dreams. Thus says the Lord God, the sovereign God, not just the Lord, the God of Israel but the Lord God, he's the one who's in charge concerning Edom.

[11 : 53] We've heard a report from the Lord and a messenger has been sent among the nations, rise up, let us rise against it for battle. That is, there's not just a political coalition somewhere around the world that is about to fight Edom but that God is orchestrating it, God's manipulating, God's stirring it up to fight against Edom.

This is God who's intervening and involved in the history of the world, bringing one nation to fight against another, to defeat another and so on. This is not a God, you see, who's remote and aloof from the world, not a God who's like the watchmaker who sets the world ticking and sits up and watches it from a heavenly distance.

This is a God who's involved, who's getting his hands dirty, who's intervening in history and here we're told that God is actually stirring up the nations to fight against and defeat smug, proud Edom.

It goes on in verse 2, I'll surely make you least among the nations, you shall be utterly despised. Though our translation puts that into the future tense, it's actually written in a past tense.

It hasn't yet happened but it's as good as happened. It's a way of saying well the future is absolutely certain. No doubts about that. Don't think, oh yeah, that's just what you're saying, it won't happen.

[13 : 10] Obadiah's words, God's words, are absolutely sure Edom will be defeated, it'll become despised, it'll become the least of all the nations. It's as good as done.

Now what incenses God most of all about Edom is probably not their wielding of the sword so much as their smugness and pride and arrogance. It is a haughty nation indeed at this time.

The territory of Edom to the south and the east of the Dead Sea is fairly impregnable, fairly inaccessible. It may not be very hospitable but it's actually a territory that's very hard to conquer.

It's the area around which the famous ruins of Petra are today though those ruins date from a bit after this time. much of the city or many of the cities and settlements of ancient Edom would have been high up in the cliffs overlooking the valley south of the Dead Sea.

Safe, able to look down on enemies, see them approaching from far distances and so on. So here we have a picture of Edom on top of the cliff in their settlements feeling fairly comfortable, fairly safe and secure, fairly impregnable, can't be attacked, can't be defeated.

[14 : 28] Smug and proud, looking down not only geographically on the world around them and their enemies but looking down their noses in pride at the other nations as well. We're safe, we're pretty good up here and so that's what Obadiah is beginning to mock in verse 3.

Your proud heart has deceived you, you that live in the clefts of the rock whose dwelling is in the heights. You see your proud heart, you think you're safe. You think you're impregnable.

Yes, you say in your heart who will bring me down to the ground as though that's a defiant challenge or taunt that the people of Edom are throwing out to the world. Come on, you come and get us, see if you can. You can't. Oh, you see, you soar aloft like the eagle verse 4 says.

Not only are you the heights of the cliff but it's as though you're flying up with the great birds of prey, the eagles, free and away from any threats.

Your nest is set among the stars, even higher still as though somehow Edom thinks that it's God, it's raining, it's in the stars, it's looking down on the world with smugness and pride.

[15 : 39] But Obadiah's words here remind us of one of those ridiculous pantomimes. He's ridiculing Edom at this point. You know, in a pantomime where the goody's on stage and all, everyone, adults and children are meant to call out, look behind you, look behind you.

Well, that's what Obadiah is doing here in effect because Edom's on the top of its cliffs looking down its nose at the world with pride and Obadiah's saying, look above you, look above you.

You see, Edom, you're looking in the wrong direction, you're looking down, that's why you're so proud and haughty and arrogant. But look above you because from there, from the stars, the end of verse 4 says, I will bring you down.

You see, Edom's not king of the world. God is and God is above them and the right direction to look is not down in arrogance but up to God in humility.

The Lord is more than a match for impregnable Edom. Pride lies at the centre of sin in the scriptures.

[16 : 53] Pride places the self first. Pride lifts the heart up and high and exalted and boastful. Pride displaces God from His throne.

Pride looks down on the world and not up to a sovereign God. And time and time and time and time again in the Bible, in Old and New Testaments, God opposes the proud.

And exalts the humble. And here is one instance of that. God opposing the pride of Edom, its boastfulness and pledging to bring it down.

That's not just an Old Testament notion. When the announcement of Jesus' coming birth was made, Mary's song before He was born announces that Jesus is coming to bring down the proud in their conceit and lift up the lowly.

And some of the words of Jesus, His fiercest condemnations were for the pride of the Pharisees and villages like Capernaum. The warning for us here is beware our proud hearts and stubborn wills.

[17 : 59] Well, if the destruction of Edom is inevitable as those opening verses have said, it will also be thorough. If a thief comes to your house, he usually doesn't take everything, he usually takes or she takes the key things that they want, what they can carry, that's it.

If you're harvesting a field, you take the bulk of the grain but there's always bits and pieces left over, the gleanings left which in ancient Israel were left for the poor. But when Edom will be plundered and pillaged by its enemies, nothing will be left.

It will be more severe than if a thief came in the night, it will be more severe than if somebody had harvested. So verse 5 said, if thieves came to you, if plunderers by night, how you've been destroyed, would they not steal only what they wanted?

Of course, that's all they take. If great gatherers came to you, would they not leave gleanings? Of course they would. But how Esau has been pillaged, his treasures searched out, the implication of that is that there will be nothing left.

It will all be gone. Worse than if a thief came. Worse than if it was just harvesting a field. Ironically, the end of Edom will come through the deceit of its allies.

[19 : 16] I say ironically because Edom was meant to be a brother nation to Israel but its betrayal of Israel, the descendants of Jacob will bring about its own downfall through the deceit and betrayal of its own allies.

So verse 7 goes on to say, all your allies have deceived you. They're the nations presumably that are gathering together a coalition to defeat Edom as Obadiah speaks. They have driven you to the border, your confederates have prevailed against you, those who ate your bread, that is your friends, have set a trap for you.

There's no understanding for it. That is, Edom will not be able to fathom why their allies have suddenly turned against them. Then the next two verses tell us that the leadership of the nation will be destroyed.

The civil leadership, here called the wise people, the military leadership in verse 9. Edom, it seems, was famous for its wisdom. One of the comforters of Job, the man who suffered so much in one of the other books of the Old Testament, one of his comforters, a wise person, so called, had come from Edom.

On that day, says the Lord, I'll destroy the wise out of Edom and understanding from Mount Esau, another name for the country. And then the military, your warriors, shall be shattered, O Timan, one of the major cities of ancient Edom, so that everyone from Mount Esau will be cut off.

[20 : 39] It's a fairly bleak picture of the future of Edom. And now come the reasons why God is going to act this way against it. We've already picked up that it's proud.

What in specific has it been doing that warrants such an attack from God ultimately? Firstly, violence and slaughter against the people of Israel.

For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you. No longer pride at the top of the mountain, uncovered because you're on top of the world, but now shame shall be upon your head and you shall be cut off forever.

Secondly, because Edom had refused to come to Israel's aid when Babylon conquered them. Now, one level, humanly speaking, we wouldn't want to blame Edom. Babylon's the world's superpower.

A little nation like Edom, what are they going to do to try and ally themselves with Israel? No wonder they stood on the sidelines. We'll watch Babylon win and then we'll join in. We want to be on the side of the winner. So, verse 11, on the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates.

[21 : 45] You're a brother nation, you should have been there, but you let foreigners and strangers enter not only the city but even the temple where foreigners could not go, defiling God as well as destroying the people.

You let them cast lots for Jerusalem. You too were like one of them. There's no innocent bystander here. Edom is complicit in the guilt of conquering Israel in all of this.

And then thirdly, again their pride, their gloating over the defeat of their brother in verse 12. You should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune. You should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin.

You should not have boasted on the day of distress. Three times in effect it says the same thing. This is not a remote God who's saying, yeah, these are your sins you've gloated. This is passionate, this is intense.

God is angry and upset by what Edom has done. It's gloating at its pride over the destruction of the people of God. It's ignored its filial obligations to its brother nation and God is incensed by that.

[22 : 49] He takes relationships seriously. But not only did Edom gloat, it also looted. Verse 13, you should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity.

You should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity. You should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity. And then even more callously, they refused to treat with compassion the refugees from Israel and Judah and Jerusalem who were fleeing the destruction from Babylon.

But rather when they came across refugees, they handed them over back to Babylon to be killed or slaughtered or carted off into prison or to be slaves.

You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives. You should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress. That's what Edom has done and God will punish it for him.

And as Gilbert and Sullivan wrote, let the punishment fit the crime. For what God will do to Edom is what Edom has done to Israel.

[23 : 57] is just deserved to be mocked and brought to shame. The one who turned over refugees will find no refuge.

As Edom has judged Israel, so God will judge Edom. As it betrayed its brother nation, it will be betrayed by its allies. the punishment that's described in these verses for Edom is just deserts indeed.

For it is the activity of Edom against Israel that will be now brought on its own head. So the end of verse 15 says, as you have done, it shall be done to you.

Your deeds shall return on your own head. This is not just the swings and roundabouts of international intrigue and war.

We're one nation's king of the world for a while and then it's brought down by another nation. This is God's hand at work, bringing punishment and judgment against a sinful nation for its treatment of the people of God, Israel and Judah.

[25 : 09] We have to remember here that Obadiah's words are audacious and bold. His was a world that saw no real existing nation of Judah and Israel anymore.

It's defeated and gone. Some are in a remnant is sort of preserved in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem's a smouldering ruin and there are some survivors trying to eke out a fairly desperate existence around Jerusalem.

His was a world where it's not obvious that God was still God. It looked as though he'd been soundly and roundly defeated. to all intents and purposes, the God of Israel was dead.

The weakness of Israel and Judah implies the weakness of its God. Obadiah's words then challenge that. They say that despite the appearances on the international stage, God rules and God reigns.

These words of Obadiah are not his creation, they're God's words to him. But moreover, they are even bolder because they are not just in the end just to a little nation Edom and to the people of God.

[26 : 24] They're actually words for the world as a whole. So the book begins, we've heard a report from the Lord and a messenger has been sent among the nations. That is, God is working here amongst all the nations, all the enemies of God's people, whether or not they're friends with each other.

And then the destruction that is promised to Edom is just a foretaste of the final day of the Lord against all the nations.

Chapter 15 makes that clear, verse 15 makes that clear. For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. Obadiah is saying that despite appearances, God reigns throughout the entire world.

He reigns over the chaotic confusion of international politics. He's not defeated by the murky morass of human evil and warfare. He sits on his throne high above all human and national and international pride.

But more than that, God just doesn't stay aloof and remote. He gets active, he intervenes, he's working in the midst of history. And so Edom is no more.

[27 : 41] And sometime after these words of Obadiah, certainly by 312 BC, it's gone as a nation. There are no Edomites in the world anymore. There's no nation of Edom anymore.

Barely any ruin. The glorious ruins of Petra that are in that place date from much later, from the Nabataeans. And God still intervenes in history.

The Bible consistently tells us that time and again throughout the centuries in which the Bible's written God was active. You've got no reason to think he's any less so today, working in the world and in world situations.

But this book is also telling us and making us look forward to the time when God will finally intervene in history, on that climactic day of the Lord, on the day when justice will be meted out to all the people of this world, God's people and pagan people, on the day when God's enemies will face his judgment throne, on the day when God's people will be restored to God's presence forever, as we'll see more next week.

But that's not just a future day that's so way off that it's to be of no consequence to us. It is a day that Obadiah says is near. And Jesus when he arrived on earth said the kingdom of God is near or at hand.

[29 : 01] In one sense it's a day that has begun. Because the day when evil and Satan and death are defeated has already happened on the cross and in the empty tomb.

But we look forward to the day when that slain son of God returns to judge the living and the dead on that final day of the Lord. The mills of God's judgment might grind slowly but they grind surely and inexorably towards that day of the Lord when the judge shall return.

Now caution here. We must be careful not simply to think nationalistically as we apply these words of Obadiah. As though somehow our own nation is better than other nations or this nation or that nation is God's people.

Since the time of Jesus no nation is God's people as it was in the Old Testament. God's people as we've heard in 1 Peter already and we'll hear again in a few weeks time are scattered amongst the world.

Rightly so. The people of God now is the church not a nation and there are strong forces in our world to destroy the people of God, the church of God.

[30 : 21] Osama bin Laden doesn't rule all of those forces but he's part of it. There's opposition not only from outside Christian faith but inside as well. And for many people Christians included, the weakness of the western church in particular in the world including Australia, may well tempt us to think that God is weak, may well tempt us to despair when we see the weakness, almost the destruction of so many parts of the western church in this world.

But Obadiah is reminding us that the day of the Lord is near and that despite appearances God reigns. The day is coming when every eye will behold the returning Saviour Lord.

The day is coming when every proud knee will be forced to bow to Him. The day is coming when every proud heart will be brought low and every tongue will confess that indeed Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

The encouragement for God's people here is that we are not to fear the forces that are arrayed against God and His people in this world. They may have their day now but oh so briefly.

For the day that matters is coming is close, is near at hand, the day when Jesus returns. And our prayer is to be the prayer of the Bible's end. Come, Lord Jesus.

[31 : 52] Here we will never rise. There are swings, into Pf card world and error.

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