

Obadiah

Introduction

Our Lord is often accused of being a harsh God, a judgmental God, especially in the Old Testament. As we read and hear the indictments and judgments that God levels against those who oppose Him, we may be tempted to believe this lie. We must remember that God does not change, though (Mal. 3:6, Heb. 1:10-12). The God who loved the world so that He gave His only Son to die for the sins of the world is the same God who spoke through the prophets, like Obadiah. God always destroys His enemies in the end. It could be no other way. But we forget that God destroys His enemies by two different means.

Summary of the Text

We know almost nothing about the prophet Obadiah (“servant of Yah”). From the content of the vision, we can surmise that he lived between the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BC and the fall of Edom later that same century. God has rallied the nations together against Edom (v. 1). They have been a proud nation, but the Lord will bring them down such that there will be nothing left to them (vs. 2-6). Even their allies will betray them (vs. 6-7), and God will destroy their wisdom, understanding, and might (vs. 8-9). What has provoked His wrath? Edom has committed violence against Jacob, the people of Israel, in the day of their captivity (vs. 10-11). Not only that, they rejoiced in Israel’s calamity and turned over refugees to the Babylonians (vs. 12-14). As they have done, it will be done to them, and soon they will drink deeply of the Lord’s wrath until they are no more (vs. 15-16). The vision ends with a promise of hope for Israel. One day, God’s people will be reestablished and devour their enemies like fire does a field of stubble (vs. 17-18). They shall possess the lands of the heathen (vs. 19-20), and the kingdom shall be the Lord’s (v. 21).

Deceitful Pride

Edom is the nation descended from Esau, who had struggled with his twin brother Jacob even before they were born (Gen. 25). There were many conflicts between Edom and Israel throughout their history. Israel, as we know, had a mottled history of serving Yahweh and committing idolatry. Edom, however, though near in geography and genealogy to Israel, was generally a heathen nation. In general, the Edomites followed in the footsteps of their father Esau, who despised the promises of God.

Edom was proud because he had built great defenses, made the right alliances, was full of wisdom and understanding, and trusted in its mighty men. And in his pride, he looked on the demise of his brother and rejoiced. See what pride does. Pride blinds one to his own situation (v. 3). In Edom’s pride, he thought he was so high and mighty that none could bring him down. He laughed at his brother’s downfall, instead of taking it as a warning of his own need to repent (cf. Jer. 25:29; Prov. 24:17-18; Luke 13:1-5). God’s judgments are a sober blessing to those looking on if they will heed them.

Look what God does to a proud nation. He upends the very things that nation places its pride in. Because of his pride, Edom will be turned into a wasteland of power and wisdom. This is what happens to those who know God, yet do not glorify Him nor give Him thanks (Rom. 1:21). Professing to be wise, they become fools.

Of course, nations are made up of individuals. Pride at root is a denial that God is God and we are not, and that God's Word is the only standard for truth. Humility is knowing our place before God and submitting to His Lordship over every aspect of our lives.

The Cup of Wrath

The trope of drinking God's wrath is not uncommon in Scripture. In Isaiah 51, the Lord tells Judah that He will take away His cup of wrath from them and give it to their enemies. In Jeremiah 49, a parallel passage to Obadiah, the Lord says that Edom shall surely drink of this cup (cf. Jer. 25:15ff). In Revelation 14, those who worship the beast drink of the cup of God's wrath. Drinking the cup leads to drunkenness, stupor, and insanity (e.g., Lam. 4:21ff, Jer. 25:16). Again, we should see Romans 1 in this. God gives a people over to their lusts, their mind and reason becomes futile. They become stupid. Their wisdom is removed. And they spiral into more and more moral perversion, drinking from the cup more and more until God's wrath is finally poured out and completed. Perhaps the place that we are most familiar with the metaphor of the cup of judgment, though, is in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39, 42). Jesus pleads with the Father to let the cup pass from Him, but He submits to the Father's will. On the cross, Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath. What enemies was God destroying there?

Scripture Interpreting Scripture

What does it mean that Jacob will one day consume the house of Esau (v. 18)? How will God's people possess the land of the Canaanites such that it will be said that the kingdom is the Lord's (vs. 20-21)? We see similar promises given in other prophets, and the New Testament instructs us how to understand them, and by extension how to understand Obadiah. Joel 2:32 prophesies that "in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance," paralleling Obadiah 17. The passage leading up to this verse in Joel is shown by Peter to be fulfilled by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:16ff). Amos 9:12 says that God's people will "possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name," paralleling Obadiah 19-21. This is quoted (from the LXX) by James as part of the decision by the church in Jerusalem to welcome the Gentile believers.

So where is the deliverance that that will be in Mount Zion? How will Israel possess the land of Edom and the Gentiles? This all happens through Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon God's people, and through the spread of the gospel into the whole world. Obadiah is speaking of the gospel fire that will take over the world. At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow (Phil. 2:10), either in submission to Him or as He puts them down as His enemies.

Conclusion

You, the church, are part of the fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecy. You were the enemies of God. But Jesus drank the cup of wrath for you, so that God could destroy your stony hearts and give you new living hearts to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29), and in the end, all men will be consumed either in the fire of the Spirit and the gospel to life or by the fires of Hell. Consumed by the Spirit, you become a gospel fire yourself and go forth as a conqueror, knowing that "the kingdom shall be the Lord's."