

## **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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### **Obadiah - Warning about ignoring God as Esau did**

Although I enjoy gardening, I would not call myself a gardener as that would be implying a level of skill and knowledge that I do not possess. However, I have observed a remarkable thing about plants and shrubs, etc, that they are true to their inherent nature. What they are is what they produce. At one time I grew vegetables and the seeds sown produced the vegetables as indicated on the packets. This reminds me of the scripture, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap", Galatians 6:7. This scripture is used mainly as a warning to encourage Christians to live positive Spirit-filled lives. However, this scripture applies to everyone, Christian and non Christian alike. Additionally, nations or groups of people have a generalised character. They, too, will be judged by the fruits of that character. This was seen in the way God dealt with Sodom and Gomorrah. The people were all given over to a life style which God found abhorrent and eventually judged severely. We find in the book of Obadiah, that the nation of Edom has taken the same character as its founder, Esau!

The Prophecy of Obadiah has much to do with this principle of sowing and reaping. It is true to say that most of the books in the Bible concern the people of God whether in Old Testament or New Testament times. There are some books in the Bible which exclusively consider other than God's people, and Obadiah is one such book. Obadiah has to do with the descendants of Esau, the nation of Edom. But first, let us consider the founder of the nation: Esau.

Esau was the twin brother of Jacob. Right from birth their natures and outward appearances were entirely different. "So when [Rebekah's] days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob", Genesis 25:24-26. Right from the beginning, they were different and their occupations were completely different. "Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents", Genesis 25:27.

There was a further difference between the brothers: Esau did not value his place as the firstborn son, but Jacob was envious of his brother's status. So, one day when Esau returns from a fruitless time of hunting and near to starvation, he asks his brother for food. Jacob takes the opportunity to acquire the birthright in exchange for a bowl of vegetable stew which was red in colour. "Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom (Edom means red). But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright", Genesis 25:29-34.

In addition to the differences between the brothers, the parents, Isaac and Rebekah, were also divided in their affection. Rebekah preferred Jacob and Isaac preferred Esau. One reason for this might have been during the pregnancy when Rebekah could not understand the struggle within her womb. So Rebekah turned to the Lord for an answer to her concern. "The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger", Genesis 25:22-23.

Sometime later as Isaac was growing old he felt the need to confer upon his eldest son his blessing which was the official pronouncement of Esau's inheritance. Esau's inheritance would be greater than Jacob's. Whether Isaac realised or not that Esau had despised his birthright we are not told. But because Esau had actually sold his birthright the blessing of the first born was not rightfully his, it now belonged to Jacob. Read Genesis 27 for the account of how Rebekah and Jacob conspire to make Isaac, unknowingly, give Jacob the first born blessing.

As a result Esau feels cheated out of his inheritance. Let us read his reaction from Genesis 27:34-41 (New International Version), "When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, 'Bless me - me too, my father!' But he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.' Esau said, 'Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: he took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!' Then he asked, 'Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?' Isaac answered Esau, 'I have made him lord

over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?' Esau said to his father, 'Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!' Then Esau wept aloud. His father Isaac answered him, 'Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.' Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'"

As we read this account we can see how Esau twisted the past events in his own mind. Originally, he had despised his birthright. Now he says he was cheated out of it. We might agree that Jacob had acted without much affection for his twin but Jacob had his heart set on greater things. This may well have to do with what the Lord had told his mother, Rebekah, before he was born. And it is possible there had always been difficulties between the twins as they were obviously so different in natures. Esau's distress was probably all to do with wealth. His action years ago and Jacob's deceit had lost him his inheritance. Even today, a lost inheritance can cause tremendous problems in families.

We should notice that in the blessing that Isaac gives Esau are the seeds of lasting problems, "You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck", Genesis 27:40. It will be important to remember these words when we look at the details of Obadiah. Additionally we should note the reaction in Esau's heart, "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'" There was now an established hatred in Esau's heart and he plans his revenge to kill his brother and recover the inheritance!

Although Esau has the opportunity to carry out his revenge killing some 20 years later, he does not do so. By this time Esau has grown wealthy in his own rights and Isaac his father was still alive, see Genesis 33:9 and 35:29.

The prophecy of Obadiah concerns God's judgment upon the nation. We might say, "Why should God seek to punish the nation of Edom?" We have already noted that Esau personally did not follow through on his threats. But, Esau's hatred festered in the soul of the nation. They remained particularly antagonistic towards Jacob's descendants, the nation of Israel. Numbers 20 tells of the opposition by the Edomites who refused to let Israel pass through their territory on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. The reason why Israel took the refusal so meekly was due to a command from God, "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother", Deuteronomy 23:7. However, Edom's opposition to Israel did not stop at the above refusal. Over the years it grew into outright warfare.

Psalms 83 tells how Edom with other nations banded together to exterminate Israel. "They have said, 'Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation, that the name of Israel may be remembered no more'", verse 4. Again in Psalm 137:7, "Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom the day of Jerusalem, who said, 'Raze it, raze it, to its very foundation!'" We see from these two psalms the hostility of the surrounding nations and in particular Edom. Judah was at its lowest point but Edom oversteps the mark in their hostility. In the prophecy of Obadiah, God takes account of this and through His servant pronounces judgment on Edom.

Let us now consider the detail of Obadiah. The prophecy is a direct revelation from God, Obadiah has a vision and in it God pronounces judgment on Edom. The rumour has gone out to the nations that they might gather together against Edom, verse 1. There will be no escape and no excuse. It was not unusual for God to send His prophets outside the confines of Israel; Jonah is another example of this. Prophets were not usually welcomed when they brought a message of God's judgment and, no doubt, Obadiah went fearfully into the enemy's land. But we see the grace of God as He presents the consequence of a godless life style which, if unheeded, then judgment will come. These distant relatives of the nation of Israel should not have taken advantage of Israel's calamity to seek their own misguided revenge. Just the opposite - they should have helped those who were down. The consequence is that Edom will be reduced to a small nation and, in some respects, become insignificant in nation politics and power.

Verse 3 shows the kind of people the Edomites were, "The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; you who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?'" This was the rock fortress that we know as Petra. Access was through a very narrow canyon with the Edomites living in cave dwellings. However, no one can escape from God. "Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down," says the LORD", verse 4. God had suffered long with them but now the time of final warning had come. The severity of the judgment is illustrated by comparison to thieves who would break in and steal what they required then leave, see verse 5. "But how Esau will be ransacked, his hidden treasures pillaged!" verse 6 (New International Version). There will be a complete loss of everything they possessed. How will God accomplish this judgment? "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", verse 7 (New International Version). So the supposed friends of Edom will be the very ones who turn against them and dispossess them from their land just as Edom had done to the previous occupiers. At this point in their history, the Edomites are forced to move to a southern part of Palestine called Idumea just south of Judah. One of the reasons why the Edomites failed to

see the treachery of their supposed friends is found in verse 8, "In that day," declares the LORD, "will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau?" Although the warning comes through the prophecy, it is obvious that they despised the warning of God's servants. And so it is today, God is ignored. The Gospel message of salvation is proclaimed but the vast majority ignore both the opportunity for blessing and the warning of judgment. Further to the confounding of the wise, the army is made afraid so that in the day of battle Edom is defeated, see verse 9.

Verses 10-14 give the reason for this judgment on Edom, "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed for ever. On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune, nor rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction, nor boast so much in the day of their trouble. You should not march through the gates of my people in the day of their disaster, nor look down on them in their calamity in the day of their disaster, nor seize their wealth in the day of their disaster. You should not wait at the crossroads to cut down their fugitives, nor hand over their survivors in the day of their trouble."

In these verses we see that Edom did not help Israel in their time of need; they stood apart and watched. Edom also despised or looked down on the people and then they joined with the oppressors and marched into Jerusalem to take part in ransacking the city. And, finally, they laid in wait for fugitives who had escaped and then handed them over to the invading army. In this way we see Esau's threat from so long ago to kill his brother Jacob being carried out in this terrible act of vengeance. However, it has not gone unnoticed by the all seeing God!

As with many prophecies, there is a partial fulfilment and then, eventually, the prophecy is totally fulfilled. This is what will happen to Edom. They lost their original land which they had acquired by violence. This prophecy of Obadiah is yet to be fully completed. "When will the judgment be complete?" you might ask. Let us read verse 15, "For the day of the LORD upon all the nations is near; as you have done, it shall be done to you; your reprisal shall return upon your own head." Edom shall be one nation among many who will be dealt with severely for their part in Israel's oppression. "The day of the LORD" is a period of time when God deals with this world, no longer in grace but in judgment. This judgment time is after the Church has been taken up to heaven, see 1 Thessalonians 4. Then will come the time of tribulation, which initially will be a series of judgments on the world including unbelieving Israel, see the book of Revelation. This period of judgment ends with the restoration of Israel through a believing remnant and judgment on the nations who rebel against God.

Obadiah speaks of the time when Israel is restored in the following terms, "But on Mount Zion there shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions", verse 17. We should note that the current situation in Palestine is not the answer to these latter verses of Obadiah. However, there will be a day when the people of Israel will truly return to God and then, as these verses indicate, Israel will be used by God to judge the enemies of God and Israel. "The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame; but the house of Esau shall be stubble; they shall kindle them and devour them, and no survivor shall remain of the house of Esau," for the LORD has spoken", verse 18. This is God's judgment on a people who right from the beginning had opposed God. Israel in a coming day will be the instrument through whom God will execute that judgment. The message in these verses is a warning to the nations of the world to be careful in their treatment of Israel for God is looking on. Obadiah is not an isolated book in speaking against Edom. Isaiah 34:5 states, "For [God's] sword shall be bathed in heaven; indeed it shall come down on Edom, and on the people of My curse, for judgment."

The remaining verses, 19-21, show that after the judgment upon Edom, Israel will take up possession of the land of Palestine previously occupied by other nations. Israel will govern this land of Palestine on behalf of their Messiah, when Christ establishes His millennium reign across this whole world.

There are still descendants of Esau today. They were there when Christ was born on the first Christmas day. Bible scholars state that Herod was an Edomite and ruled over Idumea. It was a Herod of this family that endeavoured to kill the infant Jesus. However, we should note that at the commencement of the Lord's public ministry there were those from Idumea who came to Him, "Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan; and those from Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him", Mark 3:7-8. No one is excluded from the grace of God. All who come to the Saviour and accept Him for who He is, the Son of God, and repent truly of their sins will be brought into blessing and forgiveness. Today, God is a God of mercy and grace.

Let us rejoice that today we still live in the day of God's grace. God desires not the death of a sinner but "commands all people everywhere to repent", Acts 17:30 (New International Version).

Let me close with two verses from John Newton's wonderful hymn.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me;  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed!*

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