

Chapter Twenty-one God Judges: Amos, Obadiah

The prophecies of Amos and of Obadiah were uttered about a century apart yet their theme is very similar--it is that of the inevitability of judgment when sin is excused and continued. As we've already seen, Amos was a contemporary of prophets such as Isaiah, Joel, Micah, and Hosea. Though he himself grew up in the little town of Tekoa near Bethlehem in Judah, his ministry was largely directed toward the northern kingdom of Israel during the days of Jeroboam II, about the middle of the eighth century B.C. Amos has long been the favorite of social reformers, for his voice speaks with great power and clarity against injustices in social life. He minces no words in describing the atrocities and oppressions which the rich visited against the poor, and in warning the people who lived in comfort and luxury that they were living in a fool's paradise which would soon end in terrible disaster.

The atmosphere of the prophecy of Amos is set in the second verse of the first chapter where the prophet pictures Jehovah as a great lion, roaring out from Jerusalem over the cities of the land, and bringing fear and terror upon the hearts of all who hear the terrible sound.

In chapter 7 the prophet tells us a bit of his personal history. He was not trained as a prophet, nor even as a priest, but was a common herdsman--a shepherd--and a gatherer of sycamore fruit. From these humble origins he was called by God to utter a prophetic word against the extravagances of the nations surrounding Israel, against Judah the southern kingdom, and primarily against the kingdom of Jeroboam in the north. He is a striking example of the frequent pattern which God follows in calling His spokesman from unexpected backgrounds and without formal training or preparation.

The first two chapters reveal the concern of God for the behavior of nations, especially in the matter of cruelty and oppression. Using the simple formula, "for three transgressions, yea for four" God utters warnings against Damascus, the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah, and an expanded judgment uttered against Israel. The prophetic formula is an indication of patience being pushed to the extreme and finally triggered into action by a sin of such seriousness that judgment can no longer be delayed.

The flagrant sin of Damascus was her barbarous treatment of the northern area of Israel called Gilead. For this, Damascus (Syria) would be ultimately delivered into exile. Gaza (Philistia) was judged for her terrible practice of enslaving peoples and selling them for profit to other countries. Tyre (Phoenicia) was committed to judgment by fire because of her treachery in pursuing the slave traffic at the expense of breaking an agreement she had made with other nations. Edom was doomed because of her unforgiving spirit against related nations around her. Ammon was condemned because of brutality and savagery against Gilead. Moab was to be judged for her violation of the dead. Judah would face ultimate exile because of her ignoring the word of God and her idolatrous practices. All these nations had ignored their moral responsibilities and were to be called into account because of this.

Finally, turning to the northern kingdom of Israel, the prophet described her sins as oppression of the poor, shocking immorality, blasphemy, and open sacrilege which they persisted in despite the fact they had seen the Amorites destroyed for the very sins they were committing. Knowing the concern and care of God for His people as demonstrated in their own history, they had nevertheless given themselves over to open debauchery.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 all begin with the phrase "hear this word." These three addresses cover chapters 3 through 6 and lay the careful groundwork for the warnings of the prophet and his appeal to the nation for repentance.

The theme of the first discourse, in chapter 3, is that privilege does not preserve from punishment. We often feel, as the nation Israel did, that because we are the special people of God we will be preserved from danger and judgment no matter what we do. By a dramatic series of questions-, the prophet points out that when you see certain effects you can be sure of the cause. If you see two people walking together, it is clear they have some agreement. If a lion roars in the forest it is clear he has found some prey. If a bird suddenly falls in its flight it clearly has been taken in a snare, etc. His conclusion is when Jehovah roars like a lion it is time to fear for judgment is near; and when God speaks, then His prophets can only utter what He says.

In the second address, chapter 4, the prophet describes the society women of Samaria as fat cows grown rich and lazy by their indolent lives. They were charged with making excessive demands upon their husbands to satisfy their cravings, and thus contributed to the oppression of the poor and the degradation of the nation.

With stinging irony, Amos invited the peoples to increase their religious practices and to give themselves even more avidly to their rituals and meaningless sacrifices. Since they had chosen to ignore the warnings which God sent to them in the form of famines, blights, pestilences, and invasions, they may as well give themselves to empty worship since it would afford them the only pleasure they could experience until the judgment would fall.

Beginning his third address, the prophet sang a dirge over the nation as though he were already celebrating its funeral. His words are eloquent, as seen in the exhortation to "seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth!" (5:6, 7).

Two classes of people were especially singled out for warning. There were those who kept wanting "the day of the Lord." They were the religious hypocrites who made much of their feasts, sacrifices, and solemn assemblies and spoke longingly of the need of God's judgment upon blatant and open sinners, but who were unaware of their own sinful and greedy hearts. To them the prophet declared that God hated their rituals and took no delight in their offerings, and would in no wise spare them from the judgment which was to come.

The second class of people were the indifferent, those who were "at ease in Zion." These were particularly the rulers who had given themselves over to luxury and were living as though no judgment were possible. To them the prophet declared the swift and certain judgments of the Lord, and that they would be the very first to go into exile.

The third division of the prophecy covers chapter 7 through chapter 9, verse 10, and contains five visions which the prophet saw and which symbolized the people's condition. The first was of a plague of locusts which were forming to descend upon and devour the land. But when Amos saw the terrible destruction this would bring about he pled with the Lord to set it aside and his prayer was granted. The second vision was of a devouring fire (perhaps a severe drought) which again portended such destruction that the prophet pled for the people and this judgment was also averted. In the third vision the prophet was shown the Lord standing beside a wall holding a plumb line in His hand. This was a symbol of the deviations of Israel from God's righteous law. By this symbol the prophet learns that God has determined not to restore His people before judgment strikes. Against such terrible finality the prophet falls silent and does not intervene in prayer.

A parenthesis then occurs in which Amaziah, the priest of the false altar at Bethel, sends a lying report to the king concerning the ministry of Amos. With the king's authority behind him, Amaziah ordered Amos to leave the country and in defense Amos pointed out that he had not chosen to be a prophet but God had called him to it and he had no choice but to deliver the message he had been sent to speak. Amos utters a prediction of doom against Amaziah and his family because of his obstinate opposition, and foretells again the exile of Israel in a foreign land.

This interruption over, the prophet resumes his report of his visions describing how he had been shown a basket of summer fruit. Thus the nation was described as overripe and ready for judgment. Once again the prophet describes, in connection with this, the social injustices which had aroused the wrath of God against His people. They enslaved the poor, they cheated those who came to buy wheat, they were dishonest in all

their business transactions, and the result would be earthquakes, famines, darkness and utter disaster.

The fifth vision, in the opening words of chapter 9, are a vivid description of the destruction that was to come upon the nation. The prophet saw the Lord Himself standing at the altar in Bethel. Then, in terrible sovereign power, He ordered the land of Israel to be subjected to destruction and the peoples of the nations to come and take them as prey and as exiles to foreign lands.

But, as in the other prophets, the final scene is one of the ultimate restoration of blessing and prosperity. The prophet declares: "'In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,' says the Lord who does this" (9:11, 12). These words are quoted by the apostle James, in Acts 15, at the great council of Jerusalem, indicating that the prophets had foretold a time when the gospel would go out to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews, and that it would follow the restoration of the Davidic authority. Most commentators feel that this was accomplished in the first coming of Christ as the son of David but would be completely fulfilled in His return.

The closing verses of Amos are a marvelous description of the cleansing of the land and of the people in the final movement of God with Israel. A promise is given: " 'I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them,' says the Lord your God" (9:15).

Thus it becomes clear that even though Amos speaks with severe language and bitter words, the reason for divine judgment is never revenge but only that God may usher in a restored order and bring about an incredible period of blessing and joy.

OBADIAH

The book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament and can be read in just a few moments. It seems to be nothing but a pronouncement of doom against the ancient nation of Edom, which has long since disappeared from history and been buried in the dust of the past. Yet the book finds its place in the Word of God, and that fact alone indicates it has a message beyond its immediate fulfillment.

There are several men in the Old Testament named Obadiah, but the prophet who wrote this short prophecy seems to be identified with none of them. The name means "servant of Jehovah" and like a servant this Obadiah keeps himself in the background. He comes quietly onto the stage of prophecy, delivers his message, and is gone.

In Jeremiah 49 there seems to be a quotation from this book and some have surmised therefore that Obadiah was a contemporary of Jeremiah. But it seems much more likely that he prophesied somewhere around the middle of the ninth century B.C. Verses 10 through 14 of the prophecy describe an invasion and capture of the city of Jerusalem. There were four such plunderings of Jerusalem in the history of Judah and the most likely occurrence to link with this prophecy was that which took place under the reign of Jehoram of Judah in about 845 B.C. Obadiah's prophecy is directed toward the southern kingdom of Judah and yet concerns itself wholly with the predicted destruction and downfall of the nation of Edom. This nation, which we have seen frequently referred to in prophetic sections, was a descendant from Jacob's brother Esau. It occupied the rugged mountainous region south east of Judah, known in Scripture frequently as Mount Seir and whose capital was Sela, which is the Hebrew word for rock. The ruins of the city are known today as Petra, which is the Greek word for rock.

The book of Malachi, the last prophecy of the Old Testament, makes a statement from the mouth of God: "I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau" (1:2,3). This statement is quoted elsewhere in the Scriptures as declaring a great principle which runs throughout the course of scriptural history. Many have asked why God should make such a sharp distinction between these twin brothers. It is the purpose of the prophecy of Obadiah to answer the question, Why did God hate Esau? The prophecy divides into three parts verses 1 to 9 revealing

the inward attitude of the heart; verses 10 through 14 detailing the outward acts of violence and cruelty charged against Edom; and verses 15 through 21 depicting the ultimate end, both of Edom and of Judah.

The essential evil, which God declares is the source of His unending hatred, is revealed clearly in verse 3, concerning Edom: "The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is high, who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?'" The phrase "you who live in the clefts of the rock" describes the capital of Edom, now known as Petra, which is a valley plateau accessible only through a long narrow ravine, containing within it huge temples carved out of the living rock. The Edomites, therefore, felt themselves to be impregnable. But Obadiah predicts that God will cast down their strongholds and bring them into judgment. Thus the essential evil which is symbolized everywhere in Scripture by Esau and his descendants is that of the pride of self-sufficiency, the philosophy which feels it has no need of God or of any help outside itself.

This inward pride finds its expression in outward acts of violence and cruelty toward Judah, described in verses 10 through 14. When Jerusalem was under attack and the people of Judah were being carried away by strangers who had invaded the city, Edom looked on with delight and shouted for joy at the news of the overthrow of Jerusalem. Furthermore, they took an active part by delivering up the survivors to the enemies of Judah and cutting off those that escaped. Thus for their evil against their brother nation the Edomites stand condemned, and despite their proud self-sufficiency are to be brought low and humbled in the day of the Lord.

Verses 15 through 21 describe the inevitable end of pride. For the prophet states: "As you have done, it shall be done to you, your deeds shall return on your own head" (v. 15). History records that some five years after the fall of Jerusalem, in 586 B.C., the Edomites were forced out of Petra by the Nabataeans, an Arab tribe which was encouraged to the attack by Nebuchadnezzar, and settled ultimately in southern Palestine in an area which the Greeks later called Idumaea. During the Roman conquest of Palestine, the Idumaeans joined the rebellion against the Romans in A.D. 70 and were entirely exterminated during the siege of Jerusalem in the third century A.D. Origen, one of the early church fathers, spoke of them as a people whose name and language had perished.

Obadiah's prophecy closes with a prediction of restoration to come to Judah, here called Mount Zion. Thus is fulfilled the word of Obadiah that "the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions" and also "there shall be no survivor to the house of Esau; for the Lord has spoken" (vv. 17, 18).

The deeper meaning of this little prophecy can only be understood when one sees Jacob and Esau as symbols of the antagonistic principles of the flesh and the spirit in man. God hates Esau and loves Jacob because Jacob stood for all that Esau was not. Jacob represents faith in God and a willingness to submit to God's guidance. Though in the personal life of Jacob there was much of failure and of shame, yet through all his record there shines the glory of faith in God's ability to bless.

But Esau hated that ideal. His own attitude was of self-sufficiency and pride and he took every opportunity to assault his brother Jacob whenever he was down. It has been well stated that every human institution is but the lengthened shadow of its founder, and this principle is seen clearly in the nations of Judah and Edom, which descended from Jacob and Esau. There is a footnote to history in the record of the New Testament which is most remarkable in this regard. In the scenes of Passion Week when Jesus was facing His coming crucifixion, all the Gospels give an account of the time when Jesus of Nazareth stood face to face with King Herod Antipas. Jesus was the son of Jacob, His whole life was lived to express complete and utter faith in God, and in Him was fulfilled the principles of Jacob, but without Jacob's failures and follies. But Herod is an Idumaeans, an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. He is proud and arrogant, watching with cruel satisfaction the mockery of the soldiers as they stripped Jesus and dressed Him in robes of royalty. With an evil smile, he plied Jesus with many questions, but for the son of Esau there was no answer from the son of Jacob. He had nothing to say.

The final issue is most remarkable, for the son of Jacob was crucified by the violence of sinful pride but rose a conqueror and is to return to reign as Lord of lords and King of kings, so that, as Obadiah states in his closing words: "the kingdom shall be the Lord's."

But what of Herod, the son of Esau? Tradition tells us that after the crucifixion he returned to Galilee, but soon his pride led him to seek the overthrow of his brother. In appealing his case to the emperor he was dethroned and exiled in Gaul where he died a painful and hideous death. Thus the question which this shortest of the Old Testament prophecies confronts us with is relevant yet today: It is either Jacob or Esau--which do you follow?

As Jesus Himself put it in John 6:63:

"It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

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