



Obadiah 1-9 – Pride Goes Before a Fall

Lesson 2

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

This poem by William Ernest Henley summarizes well the self-reliant pride of many, many people. It is entitled “Invictus,” which is Latin for undefeated. In this poem the poet stands proudly and views himself as unconquerable and unstoppable – no matter what may come in life he remains the master of his fate and the captain of his soul.

This attitude would describe the Edomites well. They were a country that proudly stood in their secure home fortress and declared that no one and nothing could stop them. Their pride and self-sufficiency led to wickedness and abuse, and God sent them a warning that their pride was about to go before destruction and their haughty spirit before a fall (cf Proverbs 16:18). God sent the prophet Obadiah with a message of warning for Edom to abandon their arrogance before it

was too late, along with a message of hope for Judah that those who had taken advantage of them would one day be called to account.

I. Overview of Obadiah

Obadiah is the shortest book of the Old Testament. It contains a prophetic message against Edom, the neighbor and ancestral brother of Judah. Before we work our way through this book verse by verse, it's important to step back and get the big picture and to understand the historical background. In this opening half of the lesson, we will look at the nations of Judah and Edom, the historical background for the book of Obadiah itself, and then will end with an outline laying out the general structure of Obadiah.

A. Judah and Edom

The nation of Edom was a tiny country, stretching seventy miles from the northern end to the southern end and fifteen miles from east to west, a land area roughly equivalent to the state of Rhode Island. Located on the southeastern side of the dead sea, Edom was a close neighbor of Israel. Their land was hilly and mountainous, and was known as "Mount Seir," a term that shows up somewhat frequently throughout the Old Testament. This rugged terrain provided a strong military base that was hard to penetrate, a fact that brought them much pride as we will see in Obadiah. The name Edom means "red" and is a play on words referencing the red rocks of the country where they lived or the "red" pottage that Esau traded his birthright for.

Israel (and later Judah) had a rocky history with the country of Edom. The Edomites were descended from Esau, and the tense relationship between Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25-27; 32-33) was later played out between their descendants, the nations of Israel and Edom. When Israel was seeking to enter the Promised Land, Moses requested permission to pass through Edom and was denied, forcing Israel to go around (Numbers 20:14-21). Throughout the rest of the biblical record, we see Edom and Israel as hostile enemies. Judah attacks Edom, and Edom throws it right back at them (1 Samuel 14:47-48; 2 Samuel 8:14; 1 Kings 11:14-25; 2 Chronicles 20:1-30).

Several oracles or prophecies of judgment against Edom are found in the Bible. The closest match that we see is the message of Jeremiah 49:7-22, which contains almost identical language as parts of Obadiah.¹ But Jeremiah isn't the only one who prophesies against Edom. Isaiah (34:1-15), Ezekiel (35:1-15); Joel (3:19), Amos (1:11-12; 9:12), and Malachi (1:2-5) all warned Edom of God's coming punishment.

Why do you think God spends so much time addressing the tiny nation of Edom?

¹ Theologians debate whether Obadiah borrows from Jeremiah or Jeremiah borrows from Obadiah. This is important when deciding the date of Obadiah (see note below), since we know that Jeremiah wrote around 600-580 B.C.). Given that Obadiah is shorter, it is likely that Jeremiah expanded on Obadiah and incorporated his prophecy rather than that Obadiah took pieces of a prophecy by Jeremiah and altered it slightly.

What can we learn from the fact that God sent prophetic messages to nations other than Israel?

B. Historical Background

So who was Obadiah, and when did he write? We know nothing about the man Obadiah. Obadiah is a common name, being used of more than 10 different individuals in the Old Testament, and since the Obadiah who wrote this book never identifies himself in any way we can't connect him to any of them with confidence.²

Not surprisingly, given that this is the shortest book of the Old Testament and contains few details, many theologians disagree over what historical situation led to Obadiah writing. Obadiah describes the sister nation of Edom joining an attack against Judah already under way. But when did this happen? Essentially there are two views: some think this book was written during the reign of Jehoram (848-841), while other see this as being written after the devastation of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586.³ Whenever the situation occurred, it is clear from the book what Obadiah is responding to. At some point Jerusalem had come under attack, and Judah's neighbor from the southwest had taken advantage of the situation and had joined in with the attackers to take advantage of Jerusalem. God views this as being especially wicked given the close ancestral relationship with Judah ("your brother"). Although they should have had compassion on their brother, instead they took advantage of him. This injustice bothered God so much that he sent a message through the prophet Obadiah that judgment was coming.

Why is it that people are often worse to those closest to them? Why do we at times treat people we know and are close to worse than complete strangers?

² Jewish tradition from after the time of Christ identifies Obadiah the servant of Ahab as the author of this book. However, this likely due to his popularity rather than to accurate historical memory. That the king's servant in the house of Israel would write a prophetic oracle condemning the enemy of Judah in the south seems very unlikely.

³ Deciding between these two options is very difficult, as good arguments exist on both sides and Obadiah himself never gives us any specific indication of the date, so any answer is conjecture. In favor of the early date (Jehoram) is the fact that the description of Edom makes more sense as Edom joining forces with the Philistines and the and Arabians than it does with the Babylonians who totally destroyed the city. Also, the Hebrew of verses 13-14 is more naturally rendered as imperatives "You should not..." rather than past perfect "You shouldst not have..." If this is the case, then an earlier date would make more sense, as Edom was destroyed soon after the destruction of Jerusalem and would not have a later chance to repeat their crimes. Finally, similar language of Jeremiah in 49:7-22) makes more sense as Jeremiah borrowing and expanding on Obadiah than it does the other way around. The late date argues that while Scripture has Edom rebelling around the same time as the attack by the Philistines and Arabians, it doesn't necessarily link the two and so to argue that Edom joined them is conjecture. They also point to the language of returning exiles at the end of the book as fitting better with the Babylonian captivity than with the attacks of the ninth century. See Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* for a strong case for the early date, and for a good argument for the later date see Robert Chisolm, *Handbook on the Prophets*. In the end, I find the earlier date more compelling, but won't make a big deal about it in the rest of the lesson.

C. Outline

A careful study of the book of Obadiah shows that the book divides into two major sections, each of which can be further subdivided. In the first major section, God warns Edom that judgment is coming upon them because of their pride (1-14).⁴ In the second major section, God broadens his warning to include all of the nations, describing the coming day of the Lord when God will defeat Judah's enemies and restore them to their land (15-21).

God describes the judgment of Edom (1-14)

God warns Edom that judgment is coming (1-4)

God details the nature of the coming judgment (5-9)

God gives the reasons for the coming judgment (10-14)

God describes the Day of the Lord (15-21)

God's judgment on Judah's enemies (15-16)

God's restoration of his people (17-21)

II. Edom's Sin and God's Coming Judgment (Obadiah 1-9)

We will cover the first two subsections under the first point of our outline, verses 1-4 and verses 5-9. In our next lesson we will work through the final subsection of the first point (verses 10-14) and then see how this oracle against Edom is expanded to describe God's coming judgment on all the nations and his restoration of his people.

A. Pride Goes Before a Fall (1-4)

These proud, arrogant Edomites had been careless and evil in their behavior, thinking they couldn't be brought to justice. God opens this book with an immediate warning that judgment and justice was coming.

- **Introduction and Battle Call (1-2)**

The book of Obadiah begins with a report (KJV rumor) from the Lord being sent to the nations by means of an ambassador or messenger. This report is a call to arms, a call for a coalition to rise up against Edom and attack her. This opening charge is emphatic, it could be translated "Rise up and let's rise up against her to attack her." There is a sense of urgency in this call, a call from God to bring justice on Edom by bringing war against the country. God then informs the country that he has made them small and insignificant among the nations (KJV "heathen") and that have becomes despised by all.

- **Edom's Pride and God's Response (3-4)**

What phrase do you see repeated from verse 3 to verse 4?

⁴ Since Obadiah is only one chapter long, it is customary to simply use the verse numbers when giving references, and not include "1:" before each verse.

As we mentioned earlier, Edom was located in the rocky, mountainous land southeast of the Dead Sea. These towering cliffs were up to 5,000 feet above sea level! Edom had boasted that because of their secure location, they were untouchable; they viewed themselves as invincible. “No one can bring us down!” they proudly sneered (v 3). God responds to this arrogant charge by stating that he could, in fact, bring them down to the earth and that he was planning on doing so (v 4). The attitude of Edom is similar to what has been reported of the captain of the Titanic of whom it was once reported that he said “God himself couldn’t sink this ship.” In a similar way, Edom felt like they were unstoppable. They weren’t.

Why does this type of pride bother God so much? What does it reveal about a person’s view of God and of himself/herself?

In what ways might moderns think that they are “invincible” and act in sinful pride as a result?

B. The Coming Destruction (5-9)

In this section God lays out just how bad things will get for the nation, and how everything they rely on will ultimately fail them.

- **The Total Destruction of Edom (5-6)**

In this section, God makes a few chilling comparisons. He points out that people who steal typically don’t take *everything*. They will fill their arms and once they feel like they have what they need they’ll sneak away and some stuff will be left over. When grape gatherers go out to gather grapes, they aren’t obsessed with getting every last grape, and so if they miss a few and leave them behind they are okay with that.

God’s judgment against Edom will be different. God threatens to bring such destruction that every last treasure will be wiped away and they will be totally cut off. The destruction that is coming upon the nation, a destruction ultimately from God, will be total in complete.

For modern day believers, how can reading God’s warning of coming punishment on the nations of the world (and Israel as well for that matter) teach us? What do we learn about God, sin, and ourselves?

- **The Betrayal of Allies (7)**

In the ancient world, you wanted to keep your friends close. Alliances, treaties, and agreements was a game of delicate balance wherein everyone was simply trying to stay safe without having to go out and fight and without having to pay exorbitant funds for “protection.” Edom was just like other nations in that she tried to configure the international scene to give her security so that she could live in peace.

But God warns that these peace treaties and allies (KJV “men of confederacy [i.e. covenant]) will fail her. The systems she had put in place to stay safe would fail her and fail her miserably. Those who were supposedly her friends were in on the coalition and were laying a trap for her. When the day of God’s judgment came, there would be no one left standing with Edom.

Why is it that proud people often end up lonely people?

- **The Failure of Human Resources (8-9)**

Edom was proud, not only of her impressive location but also apparently of her wisemen and her army. Their confidence in what they knew and their ability to figure out the best path forward is emphasized in verse 8, and verse 9 highlights how they put their confidence in their impressive warriors. God warns the nation that when his judgment comes, both of these will fail them.

Part of Edom’s pride likely lay in its wisdom and the contingencies that they had made with other nations. How do people today similarly become proud over their own abilities and the fragile plans they have made, and what does Scripture have to say to this?

From a human perspective, Edom had a lot going for them. Why is it still wrong for them be proud? Can you think of other examples of pride that God humbled in Scripture? Why does pride bother God so much?

III. Homework!

We’re going to do something different this week! Everyone will be given homework (although no grade will be given): Read through the book of Obadiah several times and ask yourself what the big ideas of the book are. We call this a thematic study, or an inductive study. Read through Obadiah once (or perhaps even twice!) a day, and as you do ask yourself what the major ideas of the book are. Put these in general terms of how God tends to relate to people, what God is like, how humanity behaves, and what principles we find to be true across cultures and time.

Make a short list, and prepare to share them the next time you gather with your group!

Edom was confident that given their position, wisdom, and power they were invincible. But they forgot one thing: God is the one who rules over the nations and he can bring anyone down, no matter how high they exalt themselves. 2,600+ years removed this is still true. We may not be signing peace deals or living in mountain fortresses, but people today still look to their own resources and become arrogant when they think they have it together. God’s warning in Obadiah, and throughout the rest of Scripture, is that we had better realize our lives are on much shakier ground than we might think. A humble dependance on God’s sovereign, keeping power is the strongest position to be in, a lesson that Edom had to learn the hard way.