

# Does God have a Dark Side?

Obadiah 1-21

February 26, 2017

## Introduction

This morning I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is, God is just. That bad news is, God is just. What do you suppose I mean by that? I'm not going to tell you right away. You'll have to think about it.

But I will tell you why I've been thinking about that. It's because I'm preaching the book of Obadiah this morning. And yes, I do mean I will be preaching *the entire* book of Obadiah! When I agreed to preach a few months back, I thought I would enjoy preaching one of the really short books of the Bible. In the New Testament, there books like 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> John or Philemon. Then I thought, what short books are there in the Old Testament? So I turned to Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament. It's only 21 verses long. That looked like a good possibility. So I read Obadiah to remind myself what it was about and to see if I could pull perhaps three really good points out of it. And I found them. Point one: God is going to judge the Edomites. Point two: God is going to judge the Edomites. Can you guess point three? Yes, that's right! God is going to judge the Edomites!

How do you preach a Scripture like that? Actually, how do you read a Scripture like that? Maybe in your Bible reading you've come across some passages like what we find in Obadiah. Obadiah is one of the prophets, and like many of the prophets, Obadiah has a strong emphasis on God's judgment. That was a major part of a prophet's job description. He was sent by God with a message to people—often whole nations—who were living in disobedience to him. Their message frequently was "You have sinned, and God's judgment is coming. You need to repent!" Sometimes we think of prophecy in the Bible as forecasts or predictions of future events. But the main purpose of prophecy really was call people to repentance. The prophets contain many messages of hope and promises of restoration, and those can be very encouraging to read. But they also contain many dire warnings that judgment is coming.

If you're like me, you find many of these passages hard to read. They are hard to read for a number of reasons. Sometimes they can seem repetitive, like a broken record: "God is going to judge these people here. God's going to judge those other people over there. Not least, God is going to judge the Israelites. Today, it's Edom's turn." So how does all of this judgment apply to us? These ancient nations and political situations seem so far removed from our world now.

These kinds of passages can also be very discouraging. Enough with the doom and gloom! We've got enough of that already in life! Sometimes we just wish we could go and tell those old prophets to cheer up a little.

These passages about judgment aren't always the most enjoyable to read, but they are part of the Bible. And they are important! God's judgement against sin is a Biblical reality. Maybe that makes us uncomfortable because it goes against the grain of much of our culture. It also forces us to ask some difficult questions about the nature of God. We talk about how God is good, and loving, and compassionate, but is there another side to God? Does God have an angry, judgmental side? What is this God we worship really like? Can we trust him? We wrestle with questions like those. Does God have a dark side?

## The Backstory

I'm not going to answer that question right away, either. But the message of the book of Obadiah actually really helps us think through this question. To understand Obadiah, it helps to know the backstory. It's a story about the long-term rivalry between the nation of Israel and the nation of Edom. This was a rivalry that went all the way back to two twin brothers who struggled with one another in their mother's womb. Their names were Jacob and Esau.

Jacob and Esau were the grandchildren of Abraham. Abraham received a promise from God that he become the father of a great nation; of a special people whom God would use to bless the whole world. This was God's plan to redeem the world from sin. He created a people that he would claim as his own special position, whom he would guide and teach and shepherd, and through which he finally would bring the Messiah Jesus into the world as the savior for all people. God started this people by calling Abraham, and then giving Abraham a son, Isaac. Then he gave Isaac twin sons, Jacob and Esau.

When Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was pregnant with these twins she literally felt them struggle inside her. God gave her special insight into this. He said "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." (Gen 25:22-23). Jacob was the younger son by a technicality because he came out second, so he was the one who received this blessing. Jacob later gets the blessing affirmed, in part through his own trickery against Esau. The promise given to Abraham is passed to Jacob. God even gives him a new name: Israel. So Jacob becomes the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau's descendants become the nation of Edom. They settle in the area to the south of the Dead Sea, as you can see here on the map.

As we read through the Old Testament, Israel and Edom keep butting heads with each other. The Edomites antagonize Israel during their journey through the wilderness after the Exodus. After the Israelites get settled in the land, they experience ongoing warfare with many different peoples, including the Edomites. Both King Saul and King David have wars with Edom.

If you are familiar with the history of Israel in the Old Testament, you know that it's not a very cheerful story. There are a few high points, but it seems as though their history is dominated by sin. They frequently turn away from God's law and start worship idols. God is extremely patient with them. He calls them back to him time and time again. God sends prophet after prophet, but the people persist in falling away from him. It finally catches up with them. First, the Northern Kingdom of Israel conquered by Assyria. Finally, the southern kingdom and the city of Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians. And guess who is there, helping the Babylonians plunder Jerusalem? You guessed it: the Edomites! The Edomites cooperated with the Babylonians in the sacking of Jerusalem.

Let's think about this from perspective of the people of Judah who have just gone into exile. This is an absolute disaster. They were loved and honored by God as his chosen people. They were entrusted with a special status and mission as the bearers of God's redemptive promises. But they had consistently rebelled against God. And God's seemingly endless patience with them had finally come to an end.

Imagine the grief and guilt and shame the people must have felt. "Look what we've done! Oh, why didn't we repent? Why didn't we abandon our idols? Why didn't we obey God's good commandments? What will become of God's promises now? Has our unfaithfulness to God ruined his whole plan? What about God's promise to Jacob that 'The older will serve the younger?' Will God remember that promise? Does God still care about us as his chosen people?"

You can hear the cry of these people's hearts. Jerusalem has been sacked by the Babylonians, and their brothers the Edomites kicked them while they were down. It looks like God's promise hasn't come true. The older brother hasn't served the younger. And that's evidence that the rest of God's promises have failed, too. It looked like Israel would not be God's special chosen people for the redemption of world.

## The Message

Can you feel the Israelite's pain? Can you identify at all with that sorrow of guilt? Have you ever felt like your sin has ruined some of God's good purposes? Well, that's what sin does. Sin is a revolt against God's good purposes for us. It makes ugliness where God created beauty. It spills brokenness and despair where God intended wholeness and joy. It casts dark shadows where God wanted light. Sin hurts! It cuts us off from God! That's a lesson all of us need to learn. The Israelites learned it hard way.

This is where the message of Obadiah comes in. Obadiah is a message of judgment against the Edomites, but it wasn't written *to* the Edomites. It was written to the people of Judah. And God answers the cry of their hearts. Even though they have sinned and received punishment from God, they are still God's people.

Listen to what God says about Edom in verses 10-14: "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever. 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 gloat over 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 gloat over 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."

Here's what God is saying to his people: "Although you got what you deserved for your disobedience, it was still wrong of Edom to kick you while you were down and gloat over you. They will be held accountable for that. I'm still standing up for you. I've still got your back." So God is still being faithful to his promise to protect and stand up for his people. He's keeping his promise that "The older will serve the younger." This message of judgment against Edom is actually kind of a back-handed encouragement for God's people.

## The Lesson

Here we can see a very important point about God's judgment and wrath. We sometimes think of God's judgment as being the opposite of his love. Saying that God loves people, and saying that he judges their sin almost sounds like a contradiction to us. Which one is it? In Obadiah we catch a glimpse of how these actually fit together. God's promise to judge the Edomites is actually an expression of his ongoing faithfulness to his people.

So God doesn't judge in spite of his goodness and faithfulness. He judges *because of* his goodness and faithfulness! When the Bible teaches us about God's wrath, it doesn't mean that he's cranky, or has a temper problem and is prone to flying into an abusive rage at the drop of a hat. God's wrath is an expression of his goodness and faithfulness.

Here's a picture of God's wrath that I find helpful: mama bear and her cubs. If you get between mama bear and her cubs, you will experience wrath. It's not because mama bear isn't loving that

she's dangerous. It's precisely because she *is* loving. Her wrath is an expression of her instinct to protect and care for her cubs. Of course, comparing God to a bear is wildly inadequate, but I hope you see my point. God's anger against sin doesn't mean his love is defective. God gets angry because he's committed to caring for his people. He is committed to expressing his own goodness. He's committed to opposing the forces of evil that threaten that which he cares about.

So God looks down our broken world, full of pain and suffering and evil, and he says "That's not okay with me. I'm going to set things right. Those who do evil will be held accountable." That's good news! It means that God truly cares about those things that have gone wrong in our world. We want God to care, don't we? We would not be satisfied with anything less.

Now, it may be easy for us celebrate God's justice when it is aimed toward other people; toward those who we know deserve it. But it cuts both ways. *All of us* will face God's justice! We can think of it this way. Sin is a major problem in our world. No, it's more than that. Sin is *the* major problem in our world. And sin is a crime of which we are both the victims and perpetrators. All of us suffer from the effects of sin. Other people have done things to hurt us. People suffer violence and oppression because of the sins of others. We are all victims of sin, and God cares about that. But we are also complicit in sin. We are all part of the problem. And God cares about that, too. Sin is a crime of which we are both the victims and the perpetrators. So God's wrath is not evidence that God is less than good. It's evidence that *we* are less than good. God's judgment is proof that he cares about evil and that he is just. We should take comfort in that! But we should also tremble.

Think about how Israel experienced this. God was totally faithful to the promises he had made to them. He was consistent in his own righteous character. Because of that, God stood up for his people against the Edomites. That's good news! But let's not forget the context of what had just happened to Israel and Judah. They were just as sinful as the Edomites, and God punished them for it by sending them into exile. He demonstrated that he is serious about the sin of *all* people. Nobody gets off the hook.

In verse 15, Obadiah says "The Day of the LORD is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done unto you." There is a day of judgment coming, and all nations will be held accountable. God specifically addresses Edom's sins: their national pride and their violent aggression. Verses 2-3 say "See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly despised. The pride of your heart has deceived you." Verse 10 says "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever." Pride and violence are both common national problems. The nation Edom was held accountable. The nation of Judah was held accountable. Perhaps even America will be held accountable! All nations and all peoples will be held accountable on the Day of the Lord. And that includes us.

## Conclusion

Maybe you're wondering, after all this doom and gloom, "What does the New Testament have to say?" Let's read what Paul says about it in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10:

"Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."

But Paul goes on:

“But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.”

Let the message sink in. The Day of Judgment is a reality. The day is coming when God will judge all sin and evil. For us as humans that is both good news and bad news. And yet, God has taken the bad news on himself through Jesus. Those who put their trust in him are not appointed to receive wrath, but rather to receive salvation because of his death for us. If you are trusting in Jesus, he has taken the “bad news” for you. There’s just good news left for you; the good news of the gospel! But we are also burdened for those who are lost. The Day of Judgment is coming, and we are compelled to ask: “When that day comes, whose side will you be on?”

Think back to what Obadiah has taught us about the goodness and faithfulness of God. God judged Edom because of his faithful commitment to his people. It’s not because his people are so good that they deserve God’s loyalty. It’s because of God’s character. What can we learn from that? We learn that God is faithful to his people and to his promises! But the faithfulness of God is a two-edged sword. When the day of God’s judgment comes, we need to be on the right side of God’s faithfulness!

We don’t get there by any righteousness of our own. We get there by turning to God in faith and repentance. We get there by turning to Jesus Christ. He is the perfect expression of God’s faithfulness and justice and mercy. He is the fulfillment of God’s plan to redeem the world of sin. God’s plan hasn’t failed; it’s succeeded through Jesus. The remaining question is, how will you respond? When God’s Day of Judgment comes, will you be found with or without Jesus? Whose side will you be on?

This morning we’ve asked the question “Does God have a dark side?” It’s time that we give that a straight answer: no! 1 John 1:5 tells us “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” But here’s the thing about light: it casts shadows. Light creates shadows when it hits objects that resist it. The darkness in our world is not from God. It’s caused by those who are standing in rebellion against him--like the people of Judah, the people of Edom, and people like you and me. Now there is darkness, but the day is coming when the light of God will rise, shining with the brilliance of a thousand suns. When that day comes, what will it reveal about us? Will we be found with Jesus, or without him? When that day comes, whose side will you be on?

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on February 26, 2017 by Micah Carpenter.