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**Obadiah 15–18 ESV**

- <sup>15</sup> *For the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations.  
As you have done, it shall be done to you;  
your deeds shall return on your own head.*
- <sup>16</sup> *For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,  
so all the nations shall drink continually;  
they shall drink and swallow,  
and shall be as though they had never been.*
- <sup>17</sup> *But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape,  
and it shall be holy,  
and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.*
- <sup>18</sup> *The house of Jacob shall be a fire,  
and the house of Joseph a flame,  
and the house of Esau stubble;  
they shall burn them and consume them,  
and there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau,  
for the LORD has spoken.*

**Luke 21:20–24 ESV**

<sup>20</sup> *“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. <sup>21</sup> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, <sup>22</sup> for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. <sup>23</sup> Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup> They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”*

## **The day of the Lord.**

Does God punish evil people? In an attempt to make Christianity palpable to modern Americans, perhaps even in attempts to make it politically correct, the punishing hand of God has been great deemphasized. We're told that there is an afterlife, but probably not a Hell. The modern approach is to adopt the love and peace and forgiveness part of Christianity, but not the punishment and vengeance part of it. I'll get back to this, but let's start with our quotes for today.

Our first passage is the middle part of the shortest book of the Old Testament. Obadiah consists of only twenty-one verses, and this makes Obadiah the most minor of the minor prophets. Obadiah tells us nothing about himself. We don't know what part of Israel he is from, what his day job is when he's not being a prophet, or who his family might be. Obadiah means "servant of the Lord", and his very brief book, written as poetry, is about the punishment of the people of Edom. The Edomites, that is, the people of Edom, were the descendants of Esau. Esau was the evil brother of Jacob. Jacob's descendants became the Jews. The Edomites helped the Babylonians capture escaping Israelites whom they then sent into exile in Babylon. The Edomites also took control of part of the Israelites' land while they were in captivity. In his brief book, Obadiah prophesizes that the Edomites will pay for their crimes against the people of God. But the Edomites

thought that they were unassailable. The reason they were not attacked by the Babylonians, and why the Babylonians instead used them as collaborators, is that the Edomites lived in a mountainous area to the southeast of the Dead Sea. Since the Babylonians had not been able to invade their high, rocky territory, the Edomites thought that no one could harm them. Obadiah is predicting that this is not true, that God will use other foreign powers to attack them, kill them, and take their land. God will – as God often does in the Old Testament – use human armies to do God’s dirty work. Here is what Obadiah predicts in our passage:

*For the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations.*

*As you have done, it shall be done to you;  
your deeds shall return on your own head.*

<sup>16</sup> *For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,  
so all the nations shall drink continually;  
they shall drink and swallow,  
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<sup>17</sup> *But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape,  
and it shall be holy,  
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and the house of Joseph a flame,  
and the house of Esau stubble;  
they shall burn them and consume them,  
and there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau,  
for the LORD has spoken.*

This book is almost never used in Christian services. It does not talk about God’s love or forgiveness. It is a brutal, graphic expression of hatred, of the desire

for revenge on the people who helped capture and cast into exile the Chosen People. This book is about the desire for vicious vindication by the people whose land was taken by a people who were essentially their spiritual cousins. To modern Christians, it is not uplifting. It hardly seems like it belongs in Scripture at all.

But this is a myopic view of the Book of Obadiah. Let's get back to this issue of God's willingness to punish. Consider our second quote. In it, Jesus speaks of vengeance, in this case, about the destruction that God will bring at the End Times, and what will happen to those who have earned the wrath of God. Here is our second quote: *"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. <sup>21</sup> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, <sup>22</sup> for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. <sup>23</sup> Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup> They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."* Keep in mind that these evil

people, the enemy, these Gentiles, are our spiritual ancestors. Jesus brought us into the Kingdom of God and prevented us from remaining enemies of God.

But why is material like this in our faith book, our Bible? There is indeed value in talking about God's vengeance. There is a purpose in God declaring that evil will be destroyed, that evil people will be punished by the hand of God acting through the hands of other humans. And yes, those who act in God's place are often people who are just as sinful as the people God is having them punish. Let me tell you about a teacher I had in ninth grade.

You know that I went to Catholic schools and that most of my teachers were Catholic sisters. But as I was entering high school, the sixties were ending and Catholic clergy were leaving the church, especially the nuns. By the time I was in ninth grade, my teachers were mostly a mixture of priests and lay people. My ninth-grade history teacher was a priest. As a speaker, Father Brian (I am giving him a fake name) was terrible. He spoke in a mumbled monotone. That, combined with his strong Irish brogue, meant that we could hardly tell what he was saying. I relied heavily on reading the textbook. And because I was the only kid in the class who bothered to essentially memorize the thing, I had the highest grade in the class. But here's why I want to talk about Father Brian. Like a lot of the clergy who taught us, he blended religion in with the course he was assigned –

which was world history. He didn't just teach the facts of World War II, who was on what side, how it got started, how the war progressed, about the holocaust, and how the war was eventually ended with the dropping of two nuclear weapons. He talked about the morality of the whole thing. He said that there were reasons that God let war happen, and we don't understand many of those reasons. Now, mind you, the day he delivered this lecture in his muddled brogue, most of the class had tuned out. But I was such a dedicated student that I struggled hard to follow what he said. He said that one very special reason why God allowed evil like the Nazis to exist was to show that God's way can never be destroyed. God's Word will always be the last word because it will live for eternity.

This is what Obadiah is teaching us. It's not a lesson about God's ability to be brutal. The purpose isn't to make us fearful of ever doing something that would bring God's wrath upon us. The point is that the most powerful evil people on earth, despite the horrors they are able to create, are, in the end, meaningless. Time and the actions of God eventually erase what they have done. God's will always wins out in the end.

I think my history teacher was a damned good teacher. He may have been hard to understand, and the cadence of his speech may have been unbearably

monotonous, but he knew why it was important to teach history to young people. He knew that it was more than just about conveying facts. He always included a moral lesson. You had to listen hard to him to get it. He provided an insight into the text, something that the authors of the history textbook would never have thought of doing, and if you put enough energy into paying attention, the lesson was well worth it. Father Brian taught me that history is astonishingly complex, that it is filled with beauty and violence, but that the overall lesson is simple: God created all of existence; God engineered the unfolding of time; and God let bad things happen for many purposes. One is to make us realize how much we need God: we turn to God when we are desperate. By letting bad things happen, God sometimes takes us away from the commercial world of people; this way, we remember we are living in God's Kingdom. God also lets horrors happen so that we understand that God has the absolute final word. The Edomites did indeed lose everything. They were conquered by a people called the Nabateans, a nomadic tribe that roamed the Arabian desert. They were a fierce people, and in them, we see another incidence of God using an alien people to punish those who turned against God. It didn't matter that the Edomites helped the Babylonians enslave God's people. In the end, God's people survived and regained the Holy

Land, and the Edomites were destroyed. Only God's vision of the world is what matters. That is the reassuring message of the Book of Obadiah.

As an afterword to my message today, I'd like to tell you a little more about Father Brian, my ninth grade World History teacher. My father died of brain cancer. I had made multiple trips from Colorado to L.A. to see him while he was dying. When I traveled to L.A. to see him for the last time, to be there when he passed away, I walked into his room and found Father Brian sitting there next to him. My father had asked for a priest, and the man who came, decades after I finished ninth grade, was my high school World History teacher. He looked up at me. My father and I had the same name, Roger King, and when I walked in, he immediately realized who I was. "So, this is your father," he said to me. "Yes," I said, as I sat down next to him. He was holding one of my father's hands. I took the other. Father Brian looked a lot older, and for some reason, I had no trouble understanding what he said. I thanked him for visiting my father, who was now unconscious, never to wake up again. Father Brian and I chatted for a while. I told him that I greatly appreciated the way he infused the Word of God into his teaching of history. I told him that he greatly enhanced my faith by making me see that terrible things can be beautiful things because they demonstrate the finality and the primacy of God's Word. Father Brian prayed with me over my

father. He told me that what I had just said to him made his decades as a high school teacher worthwhile. Please pray with me.

*God, we truly cannot understand the reasons for what you do and for what you allow to happen. Many of us spend time worrying about this, about how you could possibly let bad things happen. We particularly wonder why you sometimes react with vengeance, when your son taught us to always act with mercy and forgiveness, and to turn the other cheek. But there is one simple, major lesson that we do understand. There are times when you not only punish evil and put an end to the actions of evil people, you also do it with incredible vehemence. You make one hell of a show out of punishing those who defy your Word. You react with unwavering vengeance against those who do wrong so that we see - in a dramatic fashion that we cannot help but notice - that your way is always the true, final, and perfect way. Nobody can overrule you. Amen.*