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Obediah Verse 15, ESV.

¹⁵ *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.*

Hating Your Neighbor: *The upside of Obediah.*

Obediah is the shortest book of the Old Testament. Since the minor prophets are called minor simply because their books are short, we could call Obediah the most minor of the prophets. Obediah is written as poetry and consists of only twenty-one verses. Obediah tells us nothing about who he is, who his family is, where he is prophesizing or when he serves as a prophet. Obediah means “Servant of the Lord”, and most people take a simplistic view of this book, seeing it only as a story about God punishing evil.

But first, I want to talk about a neighbor I had a long time ago in Los Angeles. I lived in a small apartment building on a major east-west street, called Venice Boulevard. My bedroom window happened to face another small apartment building. I was up on the second floor of two stories. The building next door was only one story. Down below my bedroom window was the living room of one of the apartments next-door. There was another young guy living there, and he would play loud music very late at night.

Many times, I walked over or shouted over, asking him to please turn it down so I could sleep. I was working on a Ph.D. thesis and often had to be at my office at the university very early in the morning. It got to a point where he would reluctantly turn it down, but only after I threatened to call the cops. Let's just say that we were not buddies. We will call him Spencer, and I will get back to Spencer, my beloved neighbor.

As a bit of background on the Book of Obediah, we need to review something that happens in Genesis. Isaac has two twin sons, Jacob and Esau, who are rivals even as young boys. Showing a lack of concern about his obligations to God, Esau, in a moment where he happens to be hungry, trades his birthright for a meal. Esau was supposed to have become the leader of the family, but he abandons that responsibility for a brief gratification. Here is how the birthright is then redirected to Jacob. Isaac, the father, who is blind, thinks that he is giving his birthright blessing to Esau, but he is tricked into giving it to Jacob. As the story goes, this changes the history of the Chosen People, because now, Jacob becomes the father of the Israelites and Esau becomes the father of the Edomites, people who lived south and east of the Dead Sea and were thus neighbors of the Israelites. The Edomites were pagan polytheists. The Bible tells us of a long history of conflict between the Edomites and the Israelites.

Historically, the Edomites were real people, and there are many references to them outside of the Bible, as well as archeological evidence of their existence. We

believe that they migrated to the land that was known as Edom around 1300 B.C., shortly before the Israelites arrived in Canaan, just to the north. The Edomites had a language that was related to the Israelite language, Hebrew. But the truth is that we do not know anything about their true ancestry. A typical biblical literary technique is to assign a negative history to a people who end up being an enemy of the Israelites. Thus, the biblical history of Jacob and Esau being the progenitors of the Israelites and the Edomites, respectively, and thus, Esau being a negative character, is probably not historically true. Interestingly, long after the story of Esau and Jacob, and long after the events written about in Obadiah occurred, in about 125 B.C., the Edomites were forcibly converted to Judaism. Then, as a separate people, they disappeared from history.

Here is a brief overview of the Book of Obadiah. The Book does not date itself and we have no other evidence that helps us place it historically, other than its content. Thus, our best guess is that Obadiah lived just after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 B.C. This would make him a contemporary of Jeremiah. While Babylon invades and conquers the Israelites and destroys their Temple, the Babylonians do not conquer the Edomites. This is because Edom is in a high, rocky territory that is very difficult to attack without risking significant losses. In verses 3 and 4, Obadiah prophesizes that the Edomites are too proudful, and that they have a false sense of security. He says that God will come for them someday:

- ³ *The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,
in your lofty dwelling,
who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the ground?”*
- ⁴ *Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD.*

When the Babylonians invade Israel, the Edomites, seemingly secure up in their mountain territory, don't simply sit by and watch the Israelites get slaughtered and their capital ransacked and destroyed. The Edomites assist the Babylonians in conquering their neighbors. The Edomites help the Babylonians capture Israelite civilians who are running for their lives, and they then expand Edom by taking over some of the Israelites' land. Here are verses 11 and 12:

- ¹¹ *On the day that you stood aloof,
on the day that strangers carried off his wealth
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them.*
- ¹² *But do not gloat over the day of your brother
in the day of his misfortune;
do not rejoice over the people of Judah
in the day of their ruin;
do not boast
in the day of distress.*

Obediah broadens his warning, telling the Edomites that God will not limit his vengeance to the people of Edom. Just as an intoxicating wine leads the drinker to eventual disorientation and ruin, God's judgment will cause all evil

nations to stumble in confusion. Furthermore, when the day of judgement comes, God's people will be rejuvenated. Here are verses 15 to 18:

- ¹⁵ 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.*
- ¹⁶ 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.*
- ¹⁷ 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.*
- ¹⁸ 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.*

Did Obediah's prophesy eventually come true? By the time of Malachi, another minor prophet, who served around 450 B.C., a hundred and thirty or so years later, Edom has indeed been devastated – and it is Babylon that eventually does attack Edom, just as they attacked Israel. Here is the beginning of Malachi:

***1** The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.*

² "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob ³ but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

⁴ If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.' "

Because it appears that the Book of Obediah is about God pouring vengeance down on sinful people and nations, and seems to contain no other message, this book is almost never used in Christian services. It does not talk about God's love and forgiveness, or about life in the Kingdom. It does not talk about the blessings of being loyal to God – other than seeing your enemy destroyed by earthly forces manipulated by God. It seems to be just a brutal, graphic depiction of the punishment that will eventually come to anyone who defies God. Indeed, it is seen as being not at all uplifting. But this is a myopic view of the Book of Obediah.

I'd like to get back to my rock'n'roll neighbor, Spencer, who lived next door to me and whose music rose up into my bedroom, often until 2 or 3 in the morning. One day, just before sunrise, there was a station wagon overfilled with men who were in the country illegally and was driving down Venice Boulevard, past our two apartment buildings. The driver was speeding, and an officer attempted to pull him over. The driver panicked and tried to outrun the cops. He flew down the Boulevard at about a hundred miles an hour, but lost control of his car and crashed into a row of cars parked out on the street next to the two apartment buildings. (And no, my car was not one of them.) It created a huge noise and both buildings shook. People began pouring out into the street. It was a gigantic mess. Several firetrucks and perhaps ten police cars showed up. Things didn't settle down for at

least an hour, as multiple ambulances were loaded up with injured people. By the time I turned back to my apartment, the sun was up. Then, I realized that Spencer was walking toward me. Alongside him was an older woman. I'll get back to this.

Here is another view of Obediah, besides the simplistic one. Notice that the Edomites were not just any people. Obediah could have done what both Isaiah and Jeremiah did, and that is to prophesize about the downfall of the Babylonians. Afterall, they were the true aggressors, the huge empire that violently expanded its territory by slaughtering other nations. Don't forget the beginning of verse 12 of Obediah:

*¹² But do not gloat over the day of your brother
in the day of his misfortune;*

Notice that Edom is called "the brother" of Israel, just as Esau was the brother of Jacob in Genesis. The prophet Obediah's message is not just about vengeance.

He chose to focus on the next-door neighbors of the Israelites, the ones who reveled in glee when Jerusalem was destroyed and prisoners were carried away.

Obediah, the "Servant of the Lord", is saying that the Edomites should have stood with their neighbor. They should have protected those who were escaping and even fought alongside the Israelites. Instead, they did what people tend to do today. They took advantage of something bad befalling a neighbor. Even if they

had simply observed what was happening and did nothing, they still would have been doing the evil thing. There are no “innocent bystanders”. When a good people fall under the hand of an oppressor, God wants their neighbors to support them actively. Instead, the Edomites chose to be prideful, which leads people to be arrogant, to be leaches, to think of themselves like they are God.

Remember the end of Chapter 25 of Matthew, just before Jesus is arrested.

These are the words of Jesus as he summarizes much of what he has taught:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Obediah is telling us that God wants us to take action to care for people in need. When we encounter people who are suffering, and we are able to reach out and help them, we must do so. This is the essence of Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor. Evil doesn't only consist of being an aggressor. Evil also consists of being the passive bystander, or even worse, someone who takes advantage of the suffering of a neighbor. The reason the people of Edom were retrofitted with the negative ancestry of being descended from the son of Isaac who abandoned his duty to God is because they did not do what Jesus would later command us to do.

So, the night that a heavily loaded station wagon slammed into several parked cars along Venice Boulevard, just as I was going back to my apartment to try to sleep for a bit, Spencer came walking up with an older woman. I remember thinking that the reason he hadn't been blasting me with Creedence Clearwater Revival the previous couple of nights was because his mother was visiting. And indeed, he walked up, with a smile on his face and introduced his mother to me. Then he turned to his mother and said, "This is Buzz, my neighbor." Then his mother shook my hand. Spencer then invited me over the next evening, when his mother would have gone back home, to listen to music. He never again blasted me until 3 A.M. I don't know what made Spencer decide to mellow out, but somehow it occurred to him that he should be treating me like his neighbor.

I want to end by giving a bit of credence to the vengeance theory of the Book of Obediah. Here is the very last verse of Obediah:

*²¹ Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion
to rule Mount Esau,
and the kingdom shall be the LORD's.*

This says that even after the prideful, cowardly, exploitive people of Edom have abandoned their brother nation and even taken part in their downfall, God will eventually crush evil and bring innocent people back to where they belong.

Mount Zion was a specific hill in Jerusalem, but in the Bible, it also represents the nation of Israel, the Israelites themselves, and all people who follow the laws of God. The survivors of the invasion of the Babylonians and the Edomites will climb back up Mount Zion and it will be renewed as the symbol of all that is good in the eyes of God.

So, even when we focus on the vengeance angle of Obediah, and not on its message of looking after your neighbor, there is something positive, something uplifting that people often ignore. With God's vengeance against evil comes the revival of those who have been harmed by that evil.