

Charles Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, had been conducting a seminar in the Indiana State Prison in the USA where just weeks before a man had been executed in the electric chair. After Colson had finished, one of the volunteers who had entered the prison with him lingered to talk with a man from death row. The condemned prisoner was James Brewer who, Colson knew, had recently become a believer. A plane was waiting to take Colson back to Indianapolis, where in two hours he was to have a meeting with the governor. So Colson pressed the volunteer to hurry, "Time's up - we must get going". "Please, please", the volunteer replied, "this is very important. You see, I am Judge Clement. I sentenced this man to die. But now he is born again. He is my brother in Christ, and we want a minute to pray together". Colson tells how he stood frozen on the spot, looking at that scene. Here were two men - one black, one white, one powerless, one powerful, one condemned to die, the other the judge who had pronounced that sentence. Yet here they stood grasping a Bible together, united as one Christian brother with another. Is there anything greater than that? Is any force in the world more powerful?

This story is a stark contrast to the theme of the book of Obadiah, the shortest book in the Old Testament and the only prophetic book addressed to a foreign nation, the nation of Edom (also known as "Tenan"). Yahweh, the Sovereign Lord, the Lord of the nations rallies them for battle against Edom (v.1). The specific sin of Edom was a severe lack of brotherhood which grew out of Edom's pride. It is characteristic of the Hebrew prophets that when they speak against a person or a nation, foretelling an imminent judgment by God, they do so in a judicial framework - that is, they make their accusation, then go about proving its validity. The prophet Obadiah, whose name means "servant of God", makes his accusation in vv.1-9 ("the Sovereign Lord says" (v.1), "declares the Lord" (v.4) and "declares the Lord" (v.8)) and then in vv.10-14 shows why that accusation is valid and why the judgment of God must come. Finally, in vv.15-21, the prophet declares God's judgment: "The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head" (v.15). Obadiah's emphasis in relation to the Day of the Lord is that in the ultimate working of God's plan the ungodly (both nations and individuals) are going to be punished while those who are his people will be lifted up and blessed in Jesus Christ - theirs will be comfort, strength and security. They will not be disappointed.

The important background to Obadiah is found in Genesis at the beginning of the Bible. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, is told that of the twins jostling in her womb, "the older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). The older or firstborn is Esau and the younger is Jacob. But the second-born desperately wanted to be the first-born. He knew he needed to get the birthright from his brother and father in order to have the family blessing. Jacob took advantage of Esau's impetuosity by convincing him to swear an oath transferring his birthright to Jacob, in exchange for a meal of lentil stew (Genesis 25:29-34). Then, with the help of his mother, Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, into granting him the blessing intended for Esau, the first-born son (Genesis 27:27-30, 37-41). Jacob thus deceived Esau twice. Esau, we are told, held a grudge. Obadiah then tells us that there was a third deception when Esau's descendants, the Edomites, were deceived. And they were self-deceived by their own pride (v.3).

Pride is deceitful and leads us to trust in anything apart from God. Edom's pride was shown in her misplaced confidence. First, Edom was proud of her almost impregnable defences due to her unique geographical situation high "in the clefts of the rocks" (V.3). From a human perspective it is hard to imagine a safer spot than Edom and its capital city of Petra. Secondly, Edom was proud of her allies - of the friendly nations with whom she had alliances - but who will deceive her (v.7). Thirdly, Edom was proud of and trusted in the advice of her wise men of understanding (v.8). And finally she was proud of and trusted in her military might. But all these would be of no avail. Obadiah prophesies that Edom will be made small and be utterly despised (v.2), brought down (v.4), totally ransacked and pillaged (v.6), destroyed (v.8) and slaughtered (v.9).

As with Edom, pride so deceives us that it leads us to place our confidence elsewhere than in God himself. The spirit of Edom is the spirit of self-sufficiency. How often have you found yourself trying to resolve the issue or difficulty that confronts you through your own efforts and resources rather than bringing that matter to the Lord in prayer - to the throne of grace, where you are assured that you will "receive mercy and find grace to help you in (your) time of need" (Hebrews 4:16)? That is the spirit of self-sufficiency!

God declares in his Word that the one he esteems is humble and contrite and trembles at his word (Isaiah 66:2). He hates every trace of human pride: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble". This is a hard lesson to learn but it must be learned nonetheless - pride is our enemy and humility is our friend. All that humbles us, whether it be lack of recognition, sickness, failure, disappointment, financial hardship and so on, is good for us.

Edom's pride drove her to ongoing resentment against her national brother Jacob. In 587-586 BC, Babylon overthrew Jerusalem and subdued Judah, the descendants of Jacob, and exiled the best of the Judean community. Edom's response was to stand aloof (v.11). Indeed, according to Obadiah (vv.11-14), the Edomites first stood by and then later participated in Judah's misfortune both by raiding the city and by catching some of the escaping people and turning them over to their enemies. Notice the repetition of the phrase "in the day" in verses 12-14. First in v.12, in the day of Judah's misfortune, you looked down on your brother. Then again in v.12, in the day of their destruction, you rejoiced over Judah. In v.13, in the day of their disaster, you marched through the gates of Jerusalem, then in the day of their disaster, you also looked down on them and finally in the day of their disaster, you seized their wealth. And in v.14, in the day of their trouble, you cut down their fugitives and handed over their survivors.

The particular horror of Edom's actions is that they were performed against those who were related to them in a special way. Edom and Judah, having descended from the twin sons of Isaac, Esau and Jacob, were brother nations. Mistreatment of one by the other was particularly atrocious because of this relationship. The prophecy of Obadiah says in v. 10, "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever" (v.10). How do we describe this sin of Edom? It is unbrotherliness. In our Western culture we may not have a high regard for brothers or sisters, husbands or wives, parents or children, but God does have this high regard for family relations, and the Bible everywhere speaks of them. For example, even in such a practical matter as making financial provision for our relatives, remember what we read in 1 Timothy 5:8 last year: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever". Those are strong words, but they are not too strong. God has put us in families, and God holds these relationships sacred.

What does unbrotherliness mean? It means acting toward my brother, or any other family member, in a way I should not act. To laugh at my brother when he makes a mistake is unbrotherly. To take delight in his failures is unbrotherly. To rejoice in his misfortune is unbrotherliness of the worst sort. In Obadiah we see a debilitating growth of sin - first in a progression from the general sin of pride to the specific sin of unbrotherliness. Second, we have it in the growth of unbrotherliness itself. In Obadiah 11-14 we find an intensification of this offence from mild beginnings to some horrible effects. The prophet mentions 7 things. First, there is the sin of standing aloof when our brother stumbles (v.11). It is interesting that this failure on the part of Edom stands first in the list of sin's progression, for it takes us back to the first form of unbrotherly conduct in the Bible. After Cain had lured his brother Abel into the fields to kill him, God came demanding, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain tried to stand aloof saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). This is what Edom was doing. Jerusalem was threatened by enemies, and the people of Edom said, "This is no business of ours. We're not their keepers. Whatever hap-

pens, happens; if they fall, it's only what serves them right. We're going to mind our own business". Were the people of Edom right in saying we are not our brothers' keepers? No. You and I have a responsibility to other men and women and a special responsibility to those within our immediate families and to those in the family of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. God holds you accountable! Where you can help, you must help. Where you can encourage, you must encourage. Where you can defend, you must defend.

This first offence, bad as it is, soon led to a second one. The people of Edom looked down on the people of Judah, they gloated over their misfortune. They considered themselves stronger and wiser than the Jews, and gloated over the gory details of their rival city's fall. Regrettably there are Christians today who can act like that looking down on other Christians who have fallen into some sin and enjoying all the juicy details. Surely our duty to other believers is to build them up (Ephesians 5:12) and to restore them if they have sinned and we come to know about it (Galatians 6:1). The third stage of this unfortunate growth of unbrotherliness is to rejoice over the misfortune of the other. This progression is easy to understand, for whenever there is hostility between two brothers, or nations, or churches, whatever it maybe, and the one sees the other in misfortune, the natural thing is to be happy about it. You ask, "Do Christians do that today?" Certainly they do! Christians talk about other Christians and can even be happy that the other one has sinned. Somehow it makes them appear better. The fourth state is boasting - "You should not....boast so much in the day of their trouble" (v.12). This grows from pride and is closely related to rejoicing over another's misfortune. We rejoice because we consider ourselves better. If we saw ourselves on the same level as others, we would mourn with them and turn to God in humble thanksgiving that we have been spared, though our sins are also many.

Up to this point, all steps in this terrible growth of unbrotherliness have been attitudes, or at least actions of a negative sort. This particular sin cannot be confined to attitudes, however. What we think inevitably leads to actions, and this is exactly what we find in the fifth, sixth and seventh items mentioned by Obadiah. What are these items? The fifth is that the Edomites marched "through the gates of my people in the day of their disaster" (v.13). The sixth is that they "seized their wealth" (v.13). The last involving 3 related actions is that they waited "at the crossroads to cut down their fugitives (and) hand over their survivors in the day of their trouble" (v.14). This last verse says that the Edomites actually caught Jews who were escaping from Jerusalem, rounded them up, and then delivered them back into the hands of their enemies. This is the ultimate growth of their sin. It sounds terrible and it is. But that is the fate of many who come to a saving faith in Christ in countries such as North Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Iran, Libya, Nigeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, India and Uzbekistan. They are betrayed by family members and close friends and handed over to their persecutors. Betrayed like their Lord and Saviour who was handed over by a trusted disciple.

Jesus Christ came into the world not "to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He put aside all sense of serving himself and came and "made himself nothing" for us, humbling himself even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). "What can I do that will be the greatest possible benefit to my brothers?" he asked and willingly gave his life to take the punishment for their sin. He is the model man, the antithesis of Edom. Edom ignored his brother, but Christ is his brother's keeper.

The enemy within us all is pride. Jack Lang, a former premier of New South Wales, said: "Always back the horse called self-interest, because you know it's the only one trying". The enemy within must be continually fought and defeated. Peter wrote in his first letter, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you

know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:5-9).

The spirit of Edom is the spirit showing itself in self-sufficiency, indifference and gloating. Only the cross of Jesus embraced by faith rids us of such deceptively blinding pride.

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it Lord that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God....

Amen

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