

Lashing out

How did this “Obadiah” make it into the canon of Scripture? Twenty-three verses of anger shouted at the Edomites



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hardly seem edifying to a person desiring to grow in faith. Perhaps the text pushes us to face the tragedies and hard questions of life. Maybe it reminds us that our failure to live by and openly declare God’s truths can bring tragedy to the world around us. In the anger of Obadiah we can see ourselves and hopefully seek the healing of God’s grace.

A psychologist was doing research for a paper on stress and anger management in ministers. He asked me what would ignite my anger more quickly than anything else in my pastoral role. I responded: “Deliberately do something to hurt one of my church members and I will confront you!” He commented, “We should talk about this!” Obadiah is angry at the neighboring Edomites, who not only stood by while the Babylonians overthrew Jerusalem, but joined in the pillaging of the city, killed some of its inhabitants and turned those escaping over to the enemy. I suspect Obadiah is angry, not just with the Edomites, but with God. Grief is a powerful emotional experience that involves fear, anger, disbelief and the need for an answer.

In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a book titled *On Death and Dying*, describing the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages may process, overlap and occur in a different order. When life crumbles around us we struggle, as did the Jews and Obadiah, we try to make sense of the situation and find a solution. As a defense against fear or anger we often craft a neat system of: 1) suffering as punishment for sin, 2) evil brought on by the action or someone else, 3) tragedy as a stimulus to spiritual growth or 4) the presumption of God’s will. This is only the short list, but I am not finding either an adequate answer or authoritative hope in any of these thoughts. We most often end up settling on the reality of the problem and growing beyond it. But some people never recover, continuing

to living in a tragedy as a persistent emotional/spiritual pain.

We meet Obadiah when he is suffering from the tragedy of Jerusalem’s fall to the Babylonians and angry at the Edomites’ for their betrayal and for their taking advantage of the devastated city. And Obadiah is also angry at God for this tragedy. Has God not always stepped in when the situation was hopeless? Israel is supposed to be God’s chosen people. The Temple was the earthly testimony to God’s presence. Does this mean Israel is going back to a second exile in an Egypt called Babylon?

Obadiah reminds us how we think and act. His words about the Edomites are scathing. The Edomites are descendants of Jacob’s twin brother, Esau (Genesis 35:10). The history of those twins was contentious, shaded by Jacob’s deceitful plot to win the family birthright from Esau (Genesis 27:1-42). Obadiah rages at the actions of the Edomites with his list of “You shouldn’t have” accusations, ending with “your actions will make you suffer” (v.15). Even though they live in a city built among the rocks in the mountains, God will find and punish them! “The house of Jacob will be a fire and the house of Esau straw, they will burn them up completely” (v.18). As in the stories of Jacob and Esau, there is much anger and vengeance, but the brothers were eventually reconciled when God intervened.

The connection between God and vengeance is frequent in the Old Testament, but the idea of grace, forgiveness, love and restoration continue strong. Like Obadiah, we tend to want both answers and an accounting. Often we translate “accounting” as retribution. As in those earlier times our world view includes punishment for the bad guys and rewards for the good. Then Jesus shows up preaching God’s love and forgiveness, treating enemies as brothers and sisters, helping those who are different and afflicted. We scramble to figure out how this all fits together. Ancient Israel never put all the pieces together, which is why so many of its stories and characters are challenging. But the love, forgiveness and patience of God are never in doubt.

Formations

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Scripture: Obadiah 1-4, 10-20

Obadiah may rage against Edom and be brokenhearted over the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, but he knows as certainly as Israel sins God is always there to offer hope.

In his anger and despair the prophet declares, “But on Mount Zion there will be those who escape, and it will be holy, and the home of Jacob will drive out those who drove them out” (v.17). Then follows a listing of how the house of Jacob will conquer the land from which they were exiled, concluding with the promise “the kingdom will be the Lord’s” (v.21).

Out of the depths of Obadiah’s grief, beyond his longing for God to punish the Babylonians and Edomites, the prophet longs for God and life that is fair. Did he understand that all cannot be right in this world? Do we understand that in the brokenness and injustices of our world the truth, justice and grace of God can transform our hearts and offer hope to others?

We are bombarded with violence, hatred and division daily. There is much anger and blame, but very little positive. For the followers of Christ there should be a positive voice and influence. Can these angry voices and violence acts signal a starting place, a first stage of our society recovering from grief? There are voices calling us to model forgiveness, reconciliation and hope for those pushed to the margins of our society. God has not abandoned us. We walk away from God and then wonder where he has gone. We can blame the “Edomites” and curse our enemies, but what are we doing to model a life with God as our center and hope?

At first Obadiah sounds like some of our politicians as he works through his anger, but at last he reaches the place where he can see God again and knows “the kingdom will be the Lord’s.” Help us, loving Father, to trust you in our grief and pain. Help us to show the world a better way.

Retired after 46 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.