

The Day of Distress

Obadiah 11-15

What is God's answer for atrocities? How does He respond to those who take out their revenge on helpless human beings? When and how will God make these wrongs right? How should we respond when those around us want to wreak revenge on others?

The nation of Edom betrayed Judah in the day of Judah's distress. The Edomite nation, located south and slightly east of the Dead Sea consisted of the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob (Israel). One author commented, "For brothers to fight under any circumstances is bad enough. But for Edom to pounce on Judah after Babylon had flattened them and left them helpless and undefended was reprehensible."ⁱ God has given us wisdom through this historical episode; we can learn from the mistakes of others. In addition to the questions above, we need to have answers ready for the following questions: *How should we respond to our fellow human beings in their day of distress? How should we treat the Jewish people – one of the most traumatized people groups in history – when anti-Semitism is on the rise? How will we be able to withstand the ire of the mob mentality when those around us want to wreak their revenge on others?*

11 In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them. **12** But thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress. **13** Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; yea, thou shouldest not have looked on their affliction in the day of their calamity, nor have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity; **14** Neither shouldest thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldest thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress. ¹⁵ For the day of the LORD *is* near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head.

That Day: When Jerusalem was destroyed

The word "day" (Hebrew [*yom*]) occurs eleven (11) times in verses 11-15. In verses 11-14, "day" refers to the day of Judah's calamity. "The most likely time of Edom's atrocities against Judah was during and/or just after Nebuchadnezzar's siege and destruction of Jerusalem and Judah."ⁱⁱ This was in 587-586 B.C. Consider the descriptions of that historic day in verses 11-14:

- The day the strangers and foreigners came to carry away captives, 11
- The day of your brother; the day he became a stranger, 12
- The day of their destruction, 12
- The day of distress, 12, 14
- The day of calamity, 13 (3x)

The Responses: How Edom responded in that day of distress

- They stood by and rejoiced as Jerusalem was destroyed and Jewish captives were carried away. 11,12

But before you follow their ways, remember the words of Proverbs **“Whoso mocketh the poor reproacheth his Maker: and he that is glad at calamities shall not be unpunished.”** (17:5) **“Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbles: Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, And He turn away his wrath from him.”** (24:17-18)

- They were united with the Babylonians in their desire to see Israel destroyed. 11 (Ezekiel 35:5 says that this was motivated out of perpetual hatred. This passage should be a wake-up call to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas today.)
- They proudly boasted about their own nation as Judah was destroyed. 12

But James 4:6 reminds us that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.

- They acted like spectators as invaders came, and then the Edomites looted Jerusalem. 13
- They blocked the fleeing refugees to be sure that they would be captured by the Babylonians. 14

There are many historic examples of how people have responded to fleeing refugees, especially in war-torn regions. When a powerful group or government is oppressing people, should believers merely stand by to watch? Consider the words of Martin Niemoller, a German Lutheran pastor during World War II. *“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me— and there was no one left to speak for me.”*ⁱⁱⁱ It has been said that *“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”*^{iv} The Edomites stood by to watch the helpless Jewish victims. But they did worse than that. Out of a proud desire to see Jerusalem destroyed, they looted Jerusalem and forced refugees back to their Babylonian oppressors. These are the atrocities of war. But does “might make right?” Just because it is within our power to abuse prisoners and steal their goods, should we do this? Before you start down that path, stop to consider the words of verse 15.

The Day of the Lord: God’s response to atrocities

For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head. (v.15)

Verse 15 declares that God will take vengeance on those who victimize others. As the just Judge of all, His punishment will be entirely appropriate based upon the oppressors’ works: **“as you have done, it shall be done to you; your reward shall return upon your own head.”** In verse 8, Obadiah had prophesied the day of the Lord upon Edom. According to verse 10, the nation of Edom would be utterly destroyed. Historians tell us that Edom was destroyed in the 6th century B.C. Verse 15 applies the Biblical principle of sowing and reaping to all the nations.

One of the most significant problems with sinful human beings is that we have a desire to take matters into our own hands: we want revenge. But the Scripture shows us a more excellent way. As Paul

described it in Romans 12:18-21, **“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹ Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. ²¹ Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”** One of the problems with getting revenge is this: we don’t know our limits. When we start down the path of getting revenge, we don’t know when to stop. We can always find another injustice to react to. By taking revenge, we will be overcome with evil. We should be what we want others to become, or we will become what they are. Instead of being witnesses for the Lord, we become judges who try to replace the Lord. Latin Roman Catholics formulated this revenge into a system called “Liberation Theology.” It is a toxic mix of a few Bible verses with socialism and communism. But instead of “trusting the Lord with all their heart” (Proverbs 3:5-6) they lean to their own understanding. In Romans 12:19, the Lord declared plainly that vengeance is His possession. He will appropriately repay atrocities in His wise and good timing. So when David was oppressed, he maintained a humble attitude toward the Lord (Psalm 35:11-16).

Applications:

Each Day: The many uses of the word “day” are instructive. Live every day remembering that the Lord knows every attitude of your heart and every action you take. Learn the fear of the Lord for the Day of the Lord is coming.

On Doing Good: (Galatians 6:10) **“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”** In Obadiah, the Lord gave us a description of unrest in a war-torn region. If we carefully think through what this passage teaches us, we can learn how to respond to future crises with the fear of the Lord. Let us do good to all men.

On Righting Wrongs: Leave the righting of historic wrongs in the hands of the Lord. You can’t undo the atrocities of your ancestors. But you can make right choices right now in the fear of the Lord. There is a movement afoot today called “the social justice movement.” “In modern practice, social justice revolves around favoring or punishing different groups of the population, regardless of any given individual's choices or actions, based on value judgements regarding historical events, current conditions, and group relations. In economic terms, this often means redistribution of wealth, income, and economic opportunities from groups whom social justice advocates consider to be oppressors to those whom they consider to be the oppressed. Social justice is often associated with identity politics, socialism, and revolutionary communism.”^v But only God’s grace can right the wrongs of the past.

On Getting revenge: Are you a vengeful person? Why not get out of the way, and hand your vengeance back to the Lord to whom it belongs? Will you join together with others in the ministry of reconciliation to make peace around the Prince of Peace?

On the Abuse of Prisoners and Innocents: In March, 2003 soldiers and staff of the 372nd Military Police Company and the C.I.A. tortured and abused prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. They reasoned that they could get more information out of the prisoners by torturing them. Most recently, reports have come to light about the renewal of waterboarding and other techniques. Our president, Donald Trump is on record as saying that waterboarding works “because we have to fight fire with

fire.” This sounds like it would get the most information out of prisoners, but, in fact, it doesn’t. During World War II, a former Congregationalist missionary to Japan, Sherwood F. Moran enlisted in the U.S. Marines. He was immediately assigned to interview Japanese POW’s. He got more information out of enemy combatants than other interrogators.^{vi} What was his secret? He treated the prisoners like human beings; he was nice to them. When we meet him in heaven, Major Moran will undoubtedly tell us that he acted in the fear of the Lord. He recognized the truth of Obadiah 15 – that the Day of the Lord is coming. Major Moran was so effective that he was recalled to Washington to retrain all military interrogators. But his lessons seem lost on a new generation of military leaders.

On American abortions: The violence of the Edomites pales in comparison to the violence of American abortions of children in the womb. The Lord’s prophecy to Israel (Ezekiel 36:18) is still with us today: **“Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols *wherewith* they had polluted it . . .”** Edom was destroyed because of its violence (v.10).

On Proclaiming the Gospel: The Lord is the only One who can right the wrongs in society. And He began by promising that He would send the Wonderful Counselor who is the Prince of Peace. **“And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself . . .”** (Colossians 1:20). If you really want world peace, then you must have the Wonderful Counselor who is the Prince of Peace. No one else could have made peace with God; Jesus made peace by the blood of His cross. And now everyone who embraces Him by faith in His death for sins, His burial and His rising again finds that hostility comes to an end. Peace with God is the foundation for peace with mankind. In the words of Micah 5:5, **“This man shall be the peace!”** Jesus will return to judge the earth with righteousness and appropriate justice in the Day of the Lord. The innocent One, against whom the mankind committed the worst atrocities, has the answer for all the world’s atrocities.

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ⁱ Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, vol. 19B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 191.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quote from the United States Holocaust Museum, cited in Wikipedia, “First They Came,” accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_they_came ...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_they_came...)

^{iv} Anonymous. This statement has been erroneously attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See Warren Throckmorton, “The Popular Bonhoeffer Quote That Isn’t in Bonhoeffer’s Works” August 25, 2016 accessed at <https://www.wthrockmorton.com/2016/08/25/the-popular-bonhoeffer-quote-that-isnt-in-bonhoeffers-works/>

^v Jim Chappelow, “What is Social Justice,” Investopedia, accessed at <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/social-justice.asp> This is closely connected to Liberation Theology. There have been recent calls for “social justice” in the evangelical movement. The great mistake is that social justice advocates insist that those who are not working for social justice are unchristian, and are not preaching the true Gospel. But these false teachers are adding to Christ’s Gospel.

^{vi} See Stephen Budiansky, “Truth Extraction,” The Atlantic, June 2005, accessed at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/06/truth-extraction/303973/>