

Salvation for Gods People

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 19th of May 2002.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Salvation for God's People and is based on Abadiah verses 15 to 21.

Salvation for God's People through these words of Scripture.

We pray that you may not only inform our minds, but increase in us our trust in you as the sovereign of all things, that we may await the day of Jesus' return.

Amen. You've probably noticed that the Dalai Lama is in town. He's here as a guru of peace, it seems.

[1 : 18] And it seems that the government is quite keen to bus loads of school children in to hear him, to tell us how to live happy lives, which is really propagating Buddhist philosophy.

It's fairly ironic, I think, that such a Nobel Peace Prize winner is actually advocating a philosophy that is independent of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

Osama bin Laden, well, he's probably not in town, but he's certainly, it seems, still at large. One of the ironies of September the 11th is that it's now become very politically correct to express greater tolerance for Muslims and Islam in our world.

And in some ways, I guess one of the aims of those terrorist attacks is actually being won over in the Western world as we now have to perhaps bend over more backwards to accommodate, be tolerant and respectful of Islam and its philosophies.

And what we see, ironically, I think, is in response to September 11, further inroads of attack against the Christian gospel and Christian people. Another irony, the champion, so-called Christian champion of the free world, the United States, God bless it, is quick to fight for Islamic Kuwaitis, but turns a blind eye to the desperate plight of, for example, the Sudanese Christians who in their millions have been slaughtered in that country.

[2 : 55] And well may we ask, where is God in such a crazy mixed-up world? Why is it that the opponents of Christianity seem to triumph and prevail in our world, through military means or through more so-called peaceful means of propagating alternative and false gospels and statements of philosophy?

Why is it that so often in our world the people of God seem unprotected or even abandoned by God left to be the victims of all sorts of evils in our world?

Is it that God has given up on our world? Is it that he's turned a blind eye to the plight of Christian people? Where is his much-spoken-about justice that the Bible seems to trumpet, but does not always seem to be evident in our world and society?

In the 6th century BC, God's people faced a similar dilemma, different circumstances certainly, but in some respects the same sort of dilemma.

Their kingdom of God's people, Judah and Israel, had been defeated by the pagan superpower Babylon, and earlier than that part of the kingdom defeated by another pagan superpower, Assyria.

[4 : 14] The capital Jerusalem had been razed and depopulated. The temple in Jerusalem had been desecrated and looted. And even their brother nation on the southern border, Edom, whose origins went back to the twin brother of the ancestor of Israel, Jacob and Esau, that brother nation and neighbor had rubbed its hands with glee at the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah and done its share of looting as well.

Where was God in that circumstance and situation? Now to be sure, the earlier prophets from Obadiah had warned that these sorts of events would occur.

In 700 BC, in the middle of that century, about 150 to 200 years before Obadiah, the prophets Amos and Hosea and Micah had all anticipated that at some point, if Israel continued down its path

of sinful behavior and disobedience to God, then part of God's response would be the destruction of the nation and the exile of its citizens.

At a similar time, Isaiah anticipated that Jerusalem would fall, although he looked forward beyond that to some words of hope from God. A little bit later, and just before Obadiah's time, the prophet Jeremiah had also anticipated the end of the people of God as a nation as God's punishment for its sins.

But they were not speaking new words either. Go back a few more hundred years before Obadiah to 1400 BC thereabouts in the leadership of Moses before the people even got into the land.

[6 : 00] God's word through Moses to the people was, if you disobey these laws and commands and ordinances that I'm giving to you, then part of the punishment of God would be defeat at the hands of their enemies and loss of land and exile away from the land.

The pain of the defeat and destruction of Jerusalem is expressed in various parts of the Old Testament, not least in the book of Lamentations, probably by Jeremiah lamenting the fall of Jerusalem and its sack by the Babylonians.

So in Obadiah's day, no doubt the people of God, perhaps like us today, looked around the world, surveyed a scene where the people of God were more or less defeated, not quite obliterated, where it looked as though God was absent or impotent, remote from the world, where it seemed that the enemies of God were triumphing and prevailing through all sorts of different means.

And perhaps he and his compatriots, perhaps like us, wondered and pondered, where is God in this world? Where are the purposes of God being worked out?

Is it really that God has abandoned this world and his people and given up? But God, through Obadiah, made it very clear that that was not the case at all.

[7 : 27] Obadiah, this little book, this little book of prophecy, proclaims very clearly that justice will be done. God's justice will be done.

The wrongs will be righted. God's people will be restored and his enemies will receive their comeuppance. Their punishment, as we saw last week, will fit the crime.

So just as Edom and other nations had looted God's people, they will be looted. As they had pillaged, they will be pillaged. As they had no compassion on refugees, nor will God have compassion on them when their nation is being destroyed, and so on.

As Edom has done, so its deeds shall return on its own head, Obadiah said at the end of verse 15. But also, as we saw last week, these events of God's justice against Edom will be just one sample of a bigger event that will go on in world history.

See, the book of Obadiah is not in the end totally concentrated on this one little nation, Edom, and its evils against God's people, though that is the bulk of the book, but rather God's vengeance and justice and punishment of this little nation of Edom for its wrongs and evils against God's people will be part of a bigger event called the Day of the Lord, which Obadiah proclaims in the beginning of verse 15 is near.

[8 : 52] It's at hand. And it's a day of the Lord that is against all the nations, not just against Edom. If we walk into the city of Melbourne and just occasionally these days might see somebody on a street corner with a little placard and sometimes a black floppy Bible and the sign that says the end of the world is nigh, repent.

Well, if you're like me, you sort of cringe a little bit when you walk past. You think, yes, yes, can't we do it in a better way and sort of maybe turn away and walk past. And you wonder whether Obadiah might have had the same sort of response.

We know that Jeremiah did when he said similar words a few decades before Obadiah, but Obadiah saying the day of the Lord is near. We wonder how his audience would have responded to those sorts of words.

The sense of gloom and doom and so on, the end of the world. Well, 2,500 years after Obadiah, how do we respond to him saying the day of the Lord is near?

How near? Has it happened? It doesn't look like it's happened in some respects. 2,500 years later, can we say about Obadiah's words that they were true or that they came true or will come true?

[10 : 11] He says that the day of the Lord is near in verse 15, but when we look around our world, we wonder really whether it's slipped us by. Maybe Obadiah got it wrong or his timing wrong.

The final words of this book of Obadiah express an extraordinary hope for the people of God.

In his day, the nation of the people of God was no more. It had been decimated, destroyed, desecrated, deserted.

Nothing left, more or less. The city brought down to its foundations the leaders, the king, the wealthy people all carted off to Babylon and other places into exile as a sort of way of almost ethnic cleansing to try and distribute the nations around so that they lose their national identity and those who were left eked out a fairly desperate existence in the country of Judah and Israel.

When Obadiah assures God's people that their fortunes will be reversed, it's very hard to imagine. Very unlikely if you looked around in the 6th century BC saying, how on earth can this be?

[11 : 27] But because God speaks it, Obadiah says, it will surely happen. Again, Obadiah uses irony when he expresses this reversal of fortunes that will come about.

He says of the little nation of Edom that in its role with Babylon in destroying Jerusalem, it's as though it's drunk the wine of delight as it's looted and pillaged the riches of Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

And so it's sat back sort of almost gloated with drink as it boasts in its triumph of Jerusalem. But Obadiah says that ironically the wine of joy and delight in victory will actually become the wine of poison of God's wrath.

He says in verse 16, for as you've drunk on my holy mountain all the nations around you shall drink, they shall drink and gulp down and shall be as though they had never been.

The image that Obadiah uses here is one that occurs a number of times in the scriptures where the wrath of God against his enemies will be like a cup of wrath that will be drunk, a poisonous chalice so to speak of the fury of God's wrath to be drunk.

[12 : 41] And here ironically as Edom has been drinking him delighted its pillaging the wine of joy will turn to poison of God's wrath and Edom will be no more.

In contrast verse 17 says that on Mount Zion there shall be those who escape. That is the nation of Edom will be no more no survivors none shall escape it but on Mount Zion which has been another name for Jerusalem which has been pillaged and ravaged and looted and desecrated and deserted by the Babylonians and the Edomites there actually shall be some who escape.

It may not look at in Obadiah's day as though there's any future for God's people in Jerusalem but he's saying that yes there will a remnant no matter how small some shall escape and come back to and dwell in Mount Zion or Jerusalem.

Not only that again surprisingly he says that mountain shall be holy. It's hard to imagine that in Obadiah's day because it's been desecrated by pagans pillaging the temple.

The place of God's presence. But when he says it shall be holy he's saying using a past tense to underscore its certainty God will dwell there again.

[13 : 56] That's what makes it holy. God's presence will take up dwelling there again. God will restore its fortunes. And moreover the end of verse 17 says that the house of Jacob a way of describing the people of God shall take possession of those who dispossess them.

And so we get a restoration of the city the presence of God and the people of God in the heart of the land of God once more. And certainly we know that a few years after Obadiah 538 BC the Babylonians had been conquered the year before by the Persians and the Persian Emperor Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and so began the return that Obadiah anticipates.

Not only does he say the end of Edom is coming but he says that the end of Edom will come at the hand of God's people who've been destroyed it seems by Edom itself.

He says in verse 18 the house of Jacob shall be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame. Two different expressions to denote the whole unity of God's people the northern kingdom the southern kingdom all brought together again they shall be like a fire or a flame not just because they're sort of hot or burning but the idea of fire is an image often used in scriptures for the judgment of God again.

So Obadiah is picking up a common theme of the judgment of God being like a fire which destroys as well as purifies and here it's the fire that will destroy because he goes on to say that the house of Esau a way of describing Edom will be stubble that is put God's people alongside Edom and they will burn them up as agents of God's wrath and Edom will be no more.

[15 : 52] So verse 18 goes on to say there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau for the Lord has spoken. And today of course there is no Edom. There's no nation of Edom.

By Jesus' day there was no nation of Edom. Three hundreds and a bit after that Edom was conquered and finally in the end totally destroyed and lost. In Obadiah's day the people of God had lost their territory the promised land of God.

The northern part of the people of God had been destroyed in 722 by Assyria. 140 years later the southern people destroyed by Babylon. In 587. And the exiles of both had been taken away to different places.

But in verses 19 and 20 Obadiah anticipates the return of God's people. those of the Negev shall possess Mount Esau those of the Shephelah the land of the Philistines.

They shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria. Benjamin shall possess Gilead. The exiles of the Israelites who are in Halah shall possess Phoenicia as far as Zarephath. And the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad shall possess the towns of the Negev.

[17:04] Well for many of us I guess they're names that we don't know and it's hard to imagine quite exactly what's being said here. But it's as though Obadiah is taking us on a little tour of the land that was promised by God.

He begins in the south. The Negev is the southern part of Israel and the desert area heading towards the Sinai Peninsula. He's saying that there Edom lived taking land from the people of God. Now that will be retaken by the people of God. He then moves to the west towards the Mediterranean. The Shephelah are the low-lying hills that run alongside or up and down the southern part of the land north-south.

That will be retaken from the Philistines who'd taken that from the coastal areas. Then to the centre he goes the land of Ephraim one of the tribes of Israel and its capital city Samaria.

That will be retaken from those who conquered it against the Israelites. And then he goes to the east the land of Gilead beyond the Jordan part of the original claim of land by the people of God in the time of Moses and Joshua.

[18:06] That will be retaken. And then he goes to the north. Those who've been exiled up into the Assyrian territories to Halah one of its cities they shall come to the north and reclaim some of the northern tribal area of Israel even as far as Zarephath which is in between Tyre and Sidon in the Mediterranean.

And then returning down to the south again where this Edom had dwelt those who've returned from Sepharad will come and retake and reclaim the Negev.

We're not quite sure where Sepharad is. Some think it was in what's modern day Iraq and Iran but most likely it's part of western Turkey in fact. A Persian area or province or satrapy as it was called was called Sparta and most probably that's what Sepharad is.

What this is saying is that the people of God who've been scattered amongst the nations under Babylon and before that Assyria will be allowed to return and in returning they will reclaim and retake the promised land of God.

Now by the time of Jesus much of this was actually had occurred. The Jews had resettled into the extent of the boundaries of the promised land more or less although not as an independent nation by Jesus' day under Roman rule but before that under Greek and previously Persian rule.

[19:27] But more importantly what Obadiah is saying here is that the promised land of God made at the beginning of the Bible to Abraham in the book of Genesis God has not abandoned that promise and though the land has been desecrated and the people have been scattered in the time of Obadiah 6th century BC God's not abandoned his promise he's not remote and absent and impotent but rather he's promising that the things that he promised of old he'll keep and somehow he'll raise up his people and bring them back to the land and they'll retake it reclaim it and resettle it as part of the promised land of God God you see saying here I keep my promises even despite appearances on the human and international scale but two more things remain in this little book to say beginning of verse 21 those who've been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau they are the saved those who are rescued or delivered or redeemed by God that is you see in the end the people of God who survive don't survive because they're powerful or clever or cunning not because they hide from their enemies or they wield a sword they're saved because God saves them

God's a saving God of his people and the only people of God ever are saved people that is nobody is a person of God because they save themselves it's a myth God saves those who save themselves or helps those who help themselves God saves as an act of his gracious power and those who are saved are saved by God they have no claim on God they're in fact being exiled

because of their sins but God who's rich in mercy saves his people but finally the last little words of this book remind us that what Obadiah is anticipating is not really just a political event in the future where one nation will rise up and conquer its previous conquerors but rather what Obadiah anticipates is a universal event because he says at the end that the kingdom shall be the Lord's you see the goal of human history for God is the kingdom of

God and that's what God is working human history towards his kingdom where he rules and he reigns and every knee acknowledges that rule God you see is the ultimate ruler the ultimate sovereign greater than any human leader greater than any political power and despite the appearances in our world as in Obadiah's world God still reigns he is still sovereign even despite appearances and it may look in our world that the evil forces against God are prevailing and triumphing but their day is fleeting and God still is in control as the hymn writer said though the wrong seems off so strong God is the ruler yet a bit over 500 years after Obadiah another person arrived in the

Middle East announcing the kingdom of God he also said it was near at hand he also said that this kingdom would be a kingdom of justice where wrongs would be righted and the people of God restored but this man claimed not just to be a prophet announcing the kingdom of God he claimed to be its king not a king in regal splendor which we and they may well have expected but a king whose reign and throne was a cross of death a cross that brought judgment against evil and evildoers but a cross that brings salvation for those of faith and repentance this king claimed that his kingdom was not of this world a bigger kingdom than even is described in the book of Obadiah a heavenly kingdom with its capital a new Jerusalem you see what that claim tells us about Obadiah's words and makes clear about

Obadiah's words is that they were not fulfilled when the exile ended in 538 BC and Jews started to return to Jerusalem nor was it fulfilled in the 300s or 200s when the nation of Edom was finally lost and defeated nor was it fulfilled even in 1948 AD when the modern state of Israel came into being but rather it is fulfilled with a kingdom not of this world with a greater king than any other king a better kingdom a better land a better capital and a kingdom that will last forever and never be defeated moreover this king who came claiming to be the king of God's kingdom also claimed to be himself the living temple of God's presence on earth so that no longer is it the case that the saved shall go up to Mount Zion to a restored building of a temple but the saved go to a person a living temple who will never be desecrated or destroyed or looted by his enemies how can we trust those words like

[25 : 09] Obadiah's words how can we be sure that Obadiah's claim that the day of the Lord is near and Jesus Christ's claim that the kingdom of God is near are true how can we trust their words that God is actually ruling and reigning and is sovereign still in this world when the appearances and the newspaper reports seem to suggest otherwise the reason because Jesus rose from the dead evil has been defeated death has been defeated the enemies of God have been defeated Satan has been defeated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the King from the dead you see today it may not look like God is in control of our world it may not look like God's enemies are defeated but the resurrection of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago tells us very clearly they are defeated and Jesus the King does reign he's defeated death he's defeated evil he's defeated

Satan he's defeated all the enemies of God and that victory of his will become even more manifest on the day when he returns oh yes God's enemies have some temporary success now but it's oh so fleeting really the ultimate triumph of God is assured by the resurrection of Jesus crowns and thrones may perish kingdoms rise and wane but the church of Jesus ever shall remain gates of hell can never against that church prevail we have Christ's own promises and they cannot fail so when you ponder our world and wonder where God is when you fear the rise of anti-Christian forces in nations by warfare by propagation of false truths or political decisions when you see the church weak and voiceless when your own faith is under attack when you think God is impotent or absent think again the day of the

Lord is near against all nations who are near is at hand but note too the warnings of Jesus when he announced the nearness of the kingdom of God that day is the day of judgment of God against all nations and all peoples who can stand on that day Jesus' commands to us were repent and believe the good news only those who repent and believe the good news of Jesus will stand on that day but for those who have repented and do believe in the good news of Jesus Christ then we can and should and must pray as the Bible ends come Lord Jesus