

## OBADIAH: Get Off the Sidelines!

Sunday, June 16, 2019

Obadiah 1-4, 8-15

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In Elie Wiesel's autobiographical novel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, he tells the story of Michael, a young Jewish man who survived the Holocaust. Michael traveled at great personal risk behind the Iron Curtain to his hometown in Hungary. Though his memory burned with images of the soldiers who brutalized him, Michael returned, not for revenge, but to satisfy his curiosity. "This, this was the thing I had wanted to understand ever since the war. Nothing else. How a human being can remain indifferent."

In a strange way, Michael understood the brutality of the executioners and the prison guards. What he did not understand was the man Wiesel called a "spectator": the one who lived across from the synagogue, who peered through his window day after day as thousands of Jews were herded into the death trains, who remained silent while these atrocities went unchecked. His face "was gazing out, reflecting no pity, no pleasure, no shock, not even anger or interest. Impassive, cold, impersonal. The face was indifferent to the spectacle."

There is a bond, Michael thought, between the brutal executioner and the victim, even though the bond is negative. "They belong to the same universe...But this is not true of that Other. The spectator is entirely beyond us. He sees without being seen. He is there but unnoticed." Wiesel concludes, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."

Indifference is a moral outrage according to Wiesel. To be forever a spectator on the sidelines of life is sinful. Such were the Edomites whom Obadiah addressed in his prophecy. The Edomites descended from Esau and they lived in a region south of Palestine. The people of Israel descended from Jacob, Esau's twin. Just as the brothers Jacob and Esau fought, so too, a feud existed between the Edomites and the Israelites which lasted for 800 years. Bitterness and hatred raged between the two groups. That smoldering animosity finally bellowed into a blaze when the Edomites did nothing as the Babylonians invaded Israel. Edom never raised a hand to help. Edom stood on the sidelines, a spectator, as Babylon ravaged Israel.

Obadiah described it this way: "*On the day you stood aloof, on the day strangers captured his wealth, while foreigners entered his gate and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were just like one of them*" (v. 11). Edom betrayed her sister nation, promising to be an ally, but choosing to do nothing. Edom abandoned Israel in her time of need. Then, to add insult to injury, the Edomites plundered Jerusalem after the battle. The Edomites captured the fleeing Israelites and turned them over to the Babylonians. The Edomites deceived their relatives in the most coldhearted way, bringing further devastation and pain on the Israelites.

Helen Keller observed, "Science may have found a cure for most evils; but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all - the apathy of human beings." Indifference is wickedness. Spectators fail to take notice of their surroundings, fail to come to the aid of people in need, fail to get involved, and fail to take a stand for what is right.

Pastor Calvin Miller tells of a coffee shop conversation with a police officer. Noticing a can of Mace on the officer's hip, Miller asked, "How does it work?" The officer explained, "You take this cap off and spray it in somebody's face." Miller asked, "Does it knock them out?" "Oh, no," said the officer. "They're still conscious, but inert." The officer added by way of emphasis, "Do you understand 'conscious but inert'?" Calvin smiled, "Man, I've been a local church pastor for twenty years. I understand 'conscious but inert' better than you might imagine."

Obadiah's vision is a judgment on a conscious, but inert people. He might very well be talking about the Church! Obadiah calls God's people to get in the game, to stop being spectators, to assume some responsibility. His prophecy reminds us that too often kind-hearted and decent people watch from the sidelines when they should get involved. His words are an accusation that we are too lax and too lethargic. We are apathetic toward the plight of others and anemic in our efforts to help them. We may be paralyzed in the face of great adversity.

"To remain indifferent to the challenges we face is indefensible," says the Dalai Lama XIV. "If the goal is noble, whether or not it is realized within our lifetime is largely irrelevant. What we must do therefore is to strive and persevere and never give up." We cannot right wrongs, heal broken souls, or change cultures from the sidelines. No war was ever won by sitting out the fight and watching. Obadiah calls us to get off the sidelines and get into the game.

God did just that! God saw the pitiful condition of humankind and decided to do something about it. God chose to be born in human form, to live and die as a human being, immersed in the pain and toil of everyday life – to be one of us – in order to change things. When we could not save ourselves, God came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to save us. Standing on the sidelines wouldn't work; God had to get some skin in the game to transform the world.

Just think of the alternative: God who dispassionately stands aloof without compassion, letting us sink under the weight of our own sins. What a horrible thought! Blessedly, God chose to stay involved. The Bible is filled with stories of the people turning from God and doing bad things; but for every story of humanity's failure, there is a companion story where God steps up to help. Indifference is not a characteristic of our God. It shouldn't be characteristic of God's people, either.

Where is God calling you to act? What game is God begging you to enter? What noble cause is God pushing you to champion? There are plenty of things to be done right here in Fergus Falls, MN. There are hungry people right here. There are people who live in substandard housing right here. There are children who need tutors right here. There are people who need jobs right here. There is no time to lose and no time like the present. These societal problems will not go away, and people will not be helped if we do nothing. Spectators are never part of the solution.

Why should we act? Obadiah reminds his hearers of "*the day of the Lord*" (v. 15). That phrase describes a time when God would pour out God's wrath on a wicked world, judge the nations, and then establish God's kingdom in fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. That phrase was also used to describe God-ordained calamities sent to punish people. This is what Obadiah means here. The Edomites failed to act. They betrayed their neighbors, going back on their word. God would make them pay. They would experience pain, suffering, hardship, and famine. Just as Babylon destroyed Israel, other nations would destroy Edom for her indifference.

No matter how discouraging the day may be for God's people, a just God will reward those who act. There may be some days when you feel as though your deeds are doing no good. Headlines will trumpet the glory of things you know are wrong. Evil will appear to triumph over good. Immorality will prevail. A decaying society will continue to crumble.

The problems will seem too big to beat. When that happens, there may be a temptation to give up. Don't you dare do it!

Just wait a while. You will see that God always has the final word, the ultimate victory. The last chapter in every story is always God's and it is always good. Which is why Obadiah concludes his prophesy with these words: "*The kingdom will be the Lord's*" (v. 21). Judgment and victory are in God's hands. May we never forget that. May we live as champions and winners regardless of the present score. We know the final victory belongs to God, and with God, we always win.

One morning in December 1955, a seamstress, a member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL, moved off the sidelines and into the game. She chose to take a stand, by sitting down. A bus driver told her to vacate her seat and move to the back of the bus, because Rosa Parks was an African American and a white person wanted her seat. In one of the most courageous acts of the twentieth century, she did not move, and she started a revolution. The next week 10,000 people gathered at her church to pray and to ask God, "What do we do next?" Because of that choice, a difficult revolution began. People were beaten, imprisoned, and some even died. But their actions changed the conscience of a nation; all because a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, Christ-following seamstress dared to act.

We cannot afford to stand by watching the moral disintegration of this society God has placed us to love and to serve. We must stand up in the name of Jesus and seize the day for him. We can no longer remain on the sidelines, indifferent. We must act and act now.

Prayer: God of power and mercy, only with your help can we offer you fitting service and praise. Only with your help will we have the courage and strength to stand tall for what is right. May we live the faith we profess and trust your promise to be with us, guide us, love us, and fortify us. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Source: Ezel, Rick. "Getting Off the Sidelines." [www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-getting-off-the-sidelines-obadiah](http://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-getting-off-the-sidelines-obadiah) site visited May 9, 2019.