

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 20, Obadiah, Part 2, Habakkuk

© 2024 Marv Wilson and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 20, Obadiah, Part 2, and then Habakkuk.

All right, I'm ready to begin.

Let's have a word of prayer, please. Our Father, as we come to the end of this week of study, we ask for the strength and focus we will need today to do our work well and to think clearly. We realize we have so much knowledge thrown at us in a very intense period of time.

Help us in the process of sorting through what we're hearing. Help us to retain the things of eternal value and to know the difference between passing theological fads. Help us to be able to correctly understand your word as we study it.

We know this is a lifelong commitment. Thank you for the work you've begun within each of us, and we pray for your help this day, that this day we might have some small victories in our life. When we put our head on the pillow, we will feel good. We will feel like Jacob, perhaps. You were in this place, even though we might not even recognize it. I pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

All right, I want to just sum up some things from our little book of Obadiah and then be going on to Habakkuk. Let me encourage you to be reading Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

That book is an attempt in the modern world by a man I've had some contact with. The book immediately became a worldwide bestseller as he struggled with the death of his own son, Aaron, who died as a shriveled-up old man at the age of 14. He died of a very rare disease that hits maybe one out of eight million people, doctors say, called progeria.

Geras means old man in Greek or elder. Progeria means advanced aging, in which your whole system is sped up. That was a very shocking experience to go through, which forced the rabbi to ask the question when your own teenage son dies in that manner, your question is, what did I do wrong? Why me? Why my family? Where is God? We prayed.

Why do bad things happen to good people is the title he came up with. While there is some theology in that book, in fact, the basic premise of the theology of that book, I hope you're going to challenge it because it needs to be challenged. Nevertheless,

there are many insightful pastoral things in that book that you can effectively use, in addition to the many, many questions he raises about this problem of evil among righteous people.

That's the theme of Habakkuk, which is theodicy—the presence of God, the goodness and justice of God in a mixed-up world. How can we believe in that good and just and loving and compassionate God when all of life seems to be falling apart? And even more so, why should we get kicked if we're God's own people? Why not the other guy? On a national level, the people of God were asking this question in Old Testament times.

Job asked it on an individual basis, another version of theophany. Habakkuk asked it for the nation, which had its own personal problems, but why should they be judged by a nation more sinful than they? Namely, why do we deserve 586? Why not the other guy? Alright, so I'll be working ahead on that. Just to sum up some loose strands on Obadiah and a few lessons, I will give an introduction, the last part, to Obadiah and Habakkuk.

As we said in the opening part, Obadiah felt very secure, very impregnable, and high, located in the cliffs directly east of the Arabah. Again, the Arabah is this 90-mile dry gulch. If you drive along here on the Israeli side, you can see a big trench in the earth.

You can visualize in your mind that originally before the glaciers settled, this whole trench was all connected by water. 43 species of fish exist here in the Sea of Galilee, not found by ichthyologists in any other body of water in the world. And it seems that when all of this settled and you have this gulch here, it's a great rift in the heart of the earth.

We find some of these magnificent rock formations, in particular, this place on the map here called Sela, S-E-L-A, which is right there. Sela. Sela is the Hebrew word for a rock or a rocky crag, which comes from Greek as Petra.

That's why you know it today as Petra. So, this is where the Edomites were, east of the Arabah, southeast of the Dead Sea. So, this is the location of this territory.

And this expression, though you soar like an eagle, is found here in verse 4, though even you set your nest among the stars. So, the poetry here suggests a people who are very, very secure. No one is going to bring us down.

God says I will bring you down. So, the pridefulness of nations before the Almighty is one of the themes of this little book. There's only one person in scripture who gets the last word, and it's not Edom.

And anyone who defies the living God, God will eventually bring them down. So, the pride theme is one. Then in the indictment of Edom after Edom's destruction is to be complete in the verses that run from 5 through 9, if people are going to steal grapes, they'll only steal as much as they can carry and leave some.

But you're like people coming in to pick grapes and clean every last grape out of there. So, it's a complete sweep, like the Bruins last night beat the Canadians 7-0. That was a big number of completions, 7. Total destruction.

All right, you don't mind a little sports with theology. That's a good mix. All right, so Edom's destruction is to be complete.

Even allies they could depend on, people they were eating bread with, the figure of speech for friendship. Those people you can depend on. Even they will turn against them.

The Hamas, verse 10, the violence done to your brother Jacob is the reason you are going to be cut off. Because you stood aloof. Our Holocaust survivors often speak of people who were victims.

They also speak of the victimizers or the perpetrators of these crimes. But also, there are the bystanders. And the bystanders are particularly difficult for Holocaust survivors.

People who idly stood by and watched when evil was done. And I think if there's an ongoing message that we see from the many genocides we've had in the modern world, including the Armenians, Hitler said, who remembers the Armenians? Now, the Armenians lost a million and a half of their people. My wife is half-Armenian, and we have martyrs in her family.

People who would not flee, who took a stand for their faith. But when Hitler came to power, it was only 30 years after the Armenian genocide. Hitler says, who remembers them? And he consequently put to death 11 million, 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews.

Obadiah's case here is, don't be indifferent to your brother. When your brother is in help, do something. Indifference to evil, Abraham Joshua Heschel said, author of one of your textbooks.

Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself. So, you stood aloof. Even one of the Psalms picks up on this refrain in so many words.

And it's Psalm 137, verse 7. Remember that Psalm that begins, By the waters of Babylon there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. It says in verse 7,

Remember, O Lord, against the Ammonites the day of Jerusalem, How they said, Raise it, raise it, down to its foundations. Their cry for vengeance.

So, standing aloof. And verses 1, 2 to 1, 4. 12 to 14. You should not have gloated over your brother and participated in his downfall.

A couple of other words. We've used the word Petra. Changed to Petra after the Nabataeans came in to that particular area.

Edom, we said, was Esau. And you get the pun: Esau comes out, Admoni, the Hebrew text says, ruddy, reddish in color. And to the ancient ear, Admoni, and Edom.

They sound alike. So, Esau is the father of the Edomites. I also mentioned Herod was an Idumean.

And you will see here the territory directly south of Judah. And if you recall what tribe settled directly south of Judah, And was actually incorporated by Judah. Remember what that one was? His name becomes the most popular name for a boy in the first century.

If you were Jewish. No? Close? Simeon. Good.

Yeah, according to Joshua, Simeon settled just south of Judah. Judah, becoming the powerful tribe, basically absorbed Simeon. But 22% of Jewish children in the first century were named Shimon.

Simeon, Shimon, it's the same name. We know that from ossuaries, names written on bone boxes from first-century inscriptions.

Tomb inscriptions and other materials. So, it's a very common name. And this is the area where Simeon settled.

Became known as Idumea. Now, how did the Edomites end up going over to the other side? Just a couple other things. One of those Edomian cities I mentioned was the city that Micah comes from.

Moresheth, or Moresheth Gath as it's sometimes called. Or after the word Moresheth became Grecianized from the Hebrew, it became Tel-Marisa. You go to the Shephelah in this area today, it's Tel-Marisa.

And a whole bunch of those caves have Edomite or Edomian pottery. This gives evidence that the Edomites didn't stay east of the Araba, but they indeed did move into this area just south of Judah. So, this little book, in a sense, reflects on the experience of the fall of the southern kingdom in 586.

And what Edomites were doing to the Jacobites. Mount Seir was one of your main cities of Edom. And the Bible, in a number of its discussions of Edom, includes the word Mount Seir.

Now let me just mention a couple of these other words. I mentioned the Nabateans. I mentioned these all the way down here.

The Nabateans were the people who came in and fulfilled this prophecy of sorts and drove the Edomites out and took them down. The Nabateans were a nomadic Arab tribe who captured Edom either late 6th century or in the 5th century. And so, the Edomites who were not killed went east.

They lived there in the caves south of Judah. And finally, at the time when the kingdom under John Hyrcanus, who ruled 134-104 BC, the Jewish king, came down into this area, and he wanted to expand the land and incorporate the Edomites. So, he went on this campaign of forced circumcision.

The biggest example of forced circumcision we have in the history of the Jewish people. So, this was compelled, and he sought to force these Edomites, these Idumeans, to accept Jewish law. So that's how this family of Herod the Great came from Idumean stock.

They were not passionately Jewish. During the Maccabean revolt in the middle of 2nd century, Judas Maccabeus, again he was very passionate for not Hellenization of Jewish religion. No.

And many of these Edomites were influenced by pagan thinking. And so, he comes in and slays 20,000 of them, around 160. So, these are some of the happenings of the Edomites in the centuries following the overthrow of the country.

A couple of final things about the narrative. After dealing with the particular, namely Edom's destruction and the reason for her destruction, particularly her lack of a positive relationship to her brother, now the lens of the camera goes very, very broad. What was true specifically of the Edomites, so now is going to be true of all nations.

What we've been finding in the prophets, the prophets combine both judgment and deliverance or redemption or hope as two themes. They play one against the other. Some people don't like the prophets because they talk too much about judgment.

And then you open the New Testament and you see the greatest prophet who ever lived, Jesus, who talks more about hell and judgment even than Paul. But he does

that in the prophetic tradition. Jesus has some very harsh words and judgmental words when you read the Gospel.

Now like in the Gospels, you can steer around those harsh judgmental words when Jesus speaks prophetically and lets it fly in terms of the sins of his generation. Or you can take the kind, gentle, mild, loving, compassionate words of Jesus and only use those. I say the prophets are a test case because either you take the whole enchilada or you don't.

There is the corrective hand of God that you find in the Old Testament, but also the Shema reminds us that God's people had a faith-love relationship with Him, and they were called to love God passionately with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might. And the prophets meddled in society, bringing rebuke. And as Heschel puts it in his opening chapters, when the prophets speak, they take us to the slums, and they rave as if the whole world were a slum.

What to us is a minor matter, a misdemeanor in business. To the prophets, it's an unmitigated disaster. And so the language stings.

It's powerful. And while it is poetical at the same time, it doesn't take away from its reality. So, Edom in a sense is the particular and now God is saying judgment upon the sins of all nations and the whole world is eventually coming.

And so we come back to the Yom Yahweh theme in verse 15. For the day of the Lord is upon all nations. Now, he launches at the end of the book to this more universal theme that God will bring all people to account for their actions.

And so here is planted the concept of judgment. Measure for measure. Human responsibility for action.

He says to nations, as you have done, it will be done to you. Verse 15. Jesus builds on that theme prophetically.

If you don't forgive others, you're not going to be forgiven. Measure for measure. As you have done the law of retribution, and if you've done evil, you will receive evil.

The modern version of this is C.S. Lewis who says in his book *The Great Divorce*, at the end of time there are only two kinds of people. And God determines which of those two kinds of people you are by the decisions you make. Decision determines destiny.

And so when you add up all of the choices people make, they reveal whether they have said all their lives, my will be done, or whether they basically add up to saying,

your will be done. And so, decision, in a sense, determines destiny. Your deeds will return on your own head.

So, for Lewis, a revelation of one's character over a long period of time results in where one spends eternity. If you have lived a certain way, then your deeds will indeed come back to you. He who sows righteousness will reap righteousness.

So, he then says, Esau, the Edomites were up there in the Temple Mount carousing, drinking, celebrating the demise of their brother. He uses that example of drinking on God's holy mountain to move from that specific example of the Edomites and their celebration over the demise of Jacob to the fact that all nations are going to be like that. All nations around the world are going to drink and feel the effects of that.

They will stagger, and they shall become non-entities if you will. They shall be as though they had not been. But God comes back then to sweeten the pie at the end.

And again, we see this so common to the prophets. Isaiah 1-39, we'll study Isaiah in the latter part of the term. Judgment.

Isaiah 40-66. Comfort, hope, deliverance, redemption. We saw that in Amos.

The end of Amos was positive. We're coming home. The tent of David will be restored.

We saw that at the end of Joel. Vindication. The nations who have acted badly will be judged.

But God will remember His own even in the midst of all of this and affirm them once again in His love. The end of Obadiah. What a powerful figure.

Verse 18, the house of Jacob will be fire and the house of Joseph a flame. So, what he's saying is God's covenant people are, as it were, going to be a torch. And who's going to get torched in the end? The house of Esau is represented by stubble.

And they will be consumed with no survivors. Now, the interesting theme in Scripture, in the prophets particularly, is God is always concerned with preserving a holy remnant. The converse of that is Esau.

There shall be no survivor to the house of Esau. But the last verse of little Obadiah here says, there will be survivors in the land of Israel. And they will go up to Mount Zion.

Notice again, the last word to go up. The last word in the Bible is go up. And you have to keep hearing the word go up.

If you check the phone directory in Boston, there's a going-up center. This Hebrew verb, Allah, to go up. You go up to Zion and it's a code word.

To go up to Jerusalem, 2600-2700 feet above sea level. You always ascend. When you emigrate out of Israel and go back into the diaspora, you literally are one of the Yordim.

That is those who descend, those who go down. You do it physically, but also your status, in a sense, goes down because there's one place in the world that's better than any other land, where the fruit is sweeter, where the air is cleaner, as the rabbis expound on the joys of Jerusalem.

Whenever I teach my Heschel seminar, which I'll be doing again next fall, I have students read Israel, an Echo of Eternity by Heschel. Where he goes into some of the rabbinic literature and how the rabbis reflected on that land, even hundreds of years into exile. They considered that land as home and the place where they wanted to return.

And so, this idea, they will go up to Mount Zion. And all these other nations with whom Israel had hassled throughout her history, the boundaries of God's kingdom, His kingdom is a universal kingdom. He will reign and rule from sea to sea.

And this expansive idea of God's reign over the entire earth. And so the final word is, These returned exiles shall rule. The Lord will be king over all.

As Revelation picks up on this theme you see in the prophets. One example is Revelation 11:15. There were loud voices in heaven saying, The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever. It sounds like that influenced a guy who wrote a song called The Messiah.

Mr. Handel. So, the lens of the camera then goes way out, and the kingdom will be the Lord. And these enemies surrounding Israel, Israel is coming to possess them.

So, verses 19 and 20 speak about how the boundaries of God's kingdom would be restored in the north and the south. And there will be a completeness of Israel's restoration expressed in these four directions. The messages are themes or motifs that are timeless that emerge from this little book.

I've touched on most of them. One is pride. Who will bring me down? Again, Edom's confident pride is in verses 2-4.

She trusts Petra. Scripture says, no, trust Zur. Trust the rock.

In the synagogue, the original song, Rock of Ages, is sung. When I take students to the synagogue, and see in the liturgy people are singing Rock of Ages, I say, that's the original Rock of Ages. In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is a rock to His people.

He's a fortress. And so Petra is not that. They were too confident in their future.

Too elevated. And pride elevates people. One of the ways in which you express personal exaltation in the Bible is through the Hebrew verb Nasa, which means literally to lift yourself up.

It's what in the Greek language is Pharaoh. To lift up, bear, or carry. And it's used in the Hebrew Bible in the seventh stem to exalt yourself, to lift yourself up, puff yourself up with pride.

That was Edom's case. Self-exaltation. And that theme again and again in Scripture, especially with Pharaoh and now with Edom, is reprehensible before the Almighty.

Another theme is a lack of brotherliness. We are family is one of the messages of the Bible. And if you really want to understand the Jewish people, you have to understand the concept of family.

First and foremost, Jews are a family. If there's one Jew that dies today in Israel, Jews around the world are going to feel the pain of that because there is corporate solidarity. There's a sense in which we feel that pain together in the 1 Corinthians 12 sense, where Paul built-in 1 Corinthians 12 on that concept which we find in the Hebrew Bible.

When one member of the community suffers, we all suffer. When one rejoices, we all share that joy together, corporately. The failure here to aid Judah when plundered, as Obadiah depicts Edom standing by.

The little book here rebukes that spirit of not becoming involved in the problem of others. Another theme is that of finding this book rebukes the spirit of people who find sadistic joy in the misfortunes of others. Gloating over their misfortune, as verse 12 puts it.

You should not have gloated over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune. You know what the rabbis said? We will celebrate this event a week from Wednesday night when we do our community interfaith Passover together. Let's live it up.

We're free. And there is singing and dancing. And there is an appropriate side to that.

But there's a fascinating midrash. When God delivered Israel from the waters of the Yam Suph, the Reed Sea, they came out on the dry ground. There is a picture of the angels of heaven singing there and rejoicing.

I don't know if that was the original Hallelujah Chorus. I think if you were stuck for 400 years, you might want to sing too. But God is wont to say, cool it.

Kill the music. You don't get overly happy when there is a demise of your enemy. Even your enemy is created in the image of God.

So even in this victory celebration of the demise of Pharaoh, don't live it up too much. Be restrained in your celebration. It's an interesting concept that you not be too carried away with the destruction of your enemy.

Even the prophets of Israel say that the enemies of Israel are really created by the God of Israel, but they just don't know the God of Israel the way His covenant people do. So, there is that theme of finding sadistic joy in the misfortunes of another. Another theme is that of the invulnerability of the nations.

It's really a delusion. I remember as a teenager, the head of Russia went on television and said to the Americans, we will bury you. I remember how disconcerting I found that as a teenager.

This guy claimed he was going to bury us as a nation. Well, that's exceedingly disturbing. I said to myself, I'll never come to adulthood.

This head of Russia is going to destroy America. Now we have an American president that comes along and calls them the evil empire. Who can bring these people down? But this idea of the invulnerability of the nations is a delusion.

As Edom had done, it would be done to her. The chickens do come home to roost. As verse 15 puts it.

As you have done to others, it will be done to you. Your deeds will boomerang. And if you don't know what a boomerang is, that's kind of a modern Living Bible translation of verse 16.

I use that Living Bible in quotations. Your deeds will boomerang. They're going to come right back to you on your own head.

Or one of the great lines from Fiddler on the Roof. Spit in the air, and it comes back in your face. I'd like to move on now to some introductory things about Habakkuk.

First of all, don't forget to spell this guy's name with three K's. Yeah. Yeah.

Tit for tat. Certainly, that's a good question. God does work in this particular case in terms of salvation history.

He does have a covenant family and a covenant people with whom he is working. And so, history is clearly interpreted in light of not God's covenant people always get a pass with everything. In fact, that was part of their problem.

They thought they deserved a pass because they were God's people. And God would not bring exile to them. The prophets certainly were critical that way.

The way the Bible tends to get at your question is from the word go: the Edomites were not in the covenant love of God because they rejected things. And in terms of selling your own birthright as a firstborn for some lentil soup, that's the picture we have of the beginnings of Esau. So, in a sense, the younger triumphs over the older because of the way he set things up himself by his own decision.

And sort of as the way the drama plays out after that, Esau represents the person who was rejected. And Jacob, despite his wrestling match and despite all of his other problems, God seemed to be the one that was working with him. I think there's a complexity also to all of this.

And we sometimes want all of life to balance out. You know, America is made up of good and bad. Modern Israel is made up of good and bad decisions, politically and militarily.

Palestinian people are not all bad. They make good decisions. And they've had leaders, many leaders, that have not been good for them.

They're still looking for good leadership who can step to the table and work out solutions for a peaceful Middle East. So, it's a very complex kind of equation. But the Bible definitely has a bias and a prejudice in terms of working out the plan of God.

And when the Bible uses even words in the Prophets for Israel as the apple of his eye, or as Isaiah puts it, the apple of my eye is in Zechariah. Isaiah says of Israel, You are engraved on my palm. Very powerful language.

This seems to suggest that from God's point of view, He does have His favorite, and in His mysterious election love, His choice to use this very flawed people to accomplish His purposes is one of the great mysteries. Humanly speaking, from our point of view, we want to add up the degrees of righteousness and say, well, I can see how God might work through that person because, look at their curriculum vitae. They check out pretty decent.

Israel had zero claim to fame. And yet God used them. And I think part of this is to confound the nations.

And what God can do with the insignificant and the obscure. You know, if I looked at this as a historian, I would say God should have chosen the Mesopotamians. They invented square roots.

Sumerians. Look at this advanced culture we know at Ur. We have 360 degrees in a circle.

60 minutes to an hour. That's because of the Babylonians. They have this hexadecimal system.

They were advanced. Or look at the Egyptians. They were pioneers in anatomy and physiology.

I would say, look at those great pyramids they built even before Abraham was born. Boy, if there's any nation that must have been impressive in the ancient world, it wasn't this ragtag group of shepherd farmers who were slaves for 400 years. And yet, after the slavery is over, 50 days later, God gives a revelation that would literally change the whole course of history.

When God takes a shepherd who was out chaperoning sheep for his father-in-law for 40 years and gives this one the revelation for the whole nation. I mean, he was no blue blood. That confounds the world on one level.

Hindsight is always better than foresight. That's for sure. But the Bible's purposes for Israel and what is true, I think, of the Christian experience.

The one whom God has called will also do it, as Paul puts it. I don't think that's really complicated in the Christian life. The calling of God equals the gifts God gives you to perform what you ought to be doing.

It's as simple as that. It's no major mystery. But if you're truly called, God is the enabler, not you.

And I think in Israel's case, Israel wasn't chosen because she was special. She was special because God chose her in his own mysterious love and plan. And other nations had to learn to respect that.

I'm saddened to tell you that the Christian church came nearly 2,000 years to understand this truth. And virtually every major denomination in the last 25 years has gone through a personal mea culpa, a proclamation of guilt, repentance,

readjustment of attitudes about the Jewish people. So even when God's people, the church, don't recognize what's going on here, we realize how difficult this is.

We may not always understand it, but it's there. Now, this little book of Habakkuk is a theodicy. Habakkuk's name may come from a root that means to clasp or embrace.

Hieronymus, that wrote the greatest Bible for a thousand years during the Middle Ages, Saint Jerome as we know him. Some of you have been down in the cave where he probably did the production of the Vulgate in Bethlehem where he had come to learn Hebrew from the rabbis. Jerome said Habakkuk was called the embracer, the clasper.

And from that we come to this idea that he's wrestling with God. And in this little book there is this wrestling with a mighty problem. The problem for Habakkuk is divine justice in a mixed up world.

Theodicy. Now, there are only seven or eight entries in an unabridged English dictionary that start theo. What are some of them? Theology is the most obvious.

The study of God. Theophany, the manifestation, the appearance, visible temporary appearance of God in some kind of tangible form. Some theophany.

What other theos? Up until the kingship, what was it? Theocracy, the rule by God. Theocracy. In the 1960s, a new school of theology was born.

We don't talk about it much today, but it was called theothanatology. Theology. God is dead theology.

We had at that time the so-called God is dead theologians. I remember reading a letter in Time magazine about the philosopher Nietzsche. God is dead, signed Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is dead, signed God. There are plenty who have had problems with God, but somebody else gets the last word on that. We have a few of these.

Theodicy wrestles with this question of the justice of God. And it's a dialogue. He's asking questions, comes back with an answer.

The question, and then God comes back with an answer. It's not always the answer that Habakkuk wanted, but there's a wonderful thing I'd say in conclusion here. We learn from our Jewish friends that God respects honest questions.

And this idea of questioning God is not forbidden territory. In fact, it's the very approach to biblical scholarship that the Jewish community gave to the world. When

biblical scholarship fell into the hands of the Greeks, the system, sadly, became the solution to biblical scholarship, where everything is systematically laid out into a schematic approach to truth.

The Hebrew approach to truth is by dialogical engagement with the text. It's what the rabbis call midrash or commentary, where Rabbi Hillel says this, and Rabbi Shammai says that, or Rabbi so-and-so says this, and Rabbi such-and-such says that. And so back and forth, by asking questions of each other, you keep an honest flow of discussion, bringing out the many layers of meaning.

Reading the Bible is more like peeling an onion than it is coming up with one word answer. There are many voices that help us understand the beauty, depth, and possibilities of thinking in a biblical text. So, the plain and simple or straightforward pashat meaning may be a place to begin, but it, for the rabbis, didn't always exhaust the meaning of the text.

Indeed, they were saying God may be revealing other things. And so, we must continue this conversation from generation to generation, exploring anew, never accepting Scripture as an artifact or as an heirloom, but owning it once again for each new generation, as each new generation asks a new set of questions. All right, that will be it for today.

This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 20, Obadiah, Part 2, and then Habakkuk.