

ATTACK OF THE VIPER Obadiah

The late Ronald Reagan loved to poke fun at himself. One of his stories was about something that happened when he was the governor of California. He was in Mexico where he had been invited to give a speech in Mexico City. He was somewhat dismayed when the audience sat politely but quietly throughout his speech and when he finished and sat down gave him only a smattering of unenthusiastic applause. He figured he must have really hit all the wrong notes somehow with his speech. This sense became even stronger when the speaker after him, speaking in Spanish, was interrupted repeatedly by wild applause. Reagan didn't speak Spanish so he had no idea what the man was saying, but not wanting to look bad he determined to be the most enthusiastic listener there. He began to vigorously applaud, continuing longer than anyone else. Very quickly though the US Ambassador to Mexico who was seated next to him, leaned over and said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you. He's just interpreting your speech."

We hate it when we think we've done poorly and we're looking bad to other people. Our pride is so easily pricked. And often it can cause us to do really stupid things. President Reagan was reminded of that reality that day in Mexico. We're going to think about pride today and consider some input from a source that is more than a little obscure. There are some books in the Bible that we call the Minor Prophets. They are not minor because they are unimportant, but because they are mostly short books and the prophets who produced them are not nearly as well-known as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. The word "minor" makes me think of baseball and its minor leagues. I think of these guys as the minor league prophets. When young players sign with a major league team they get sent to their minor league system to develop their abilities and hopefully make them ready for the majors. The lowest level in the minor leagues is the rookie league. When kids get drafted out of high school and sign a pro contract they typically go to a rookie league that has a short season beginning in June when school is out. From there a player might advance first to a low single A team, then a high A, a AA and finally a AAA team before reaching the majors. The rookie leagues are the starting point of the climb to the major leagues, the farthest from the bright lights of The Show.

In the next few weeks we are going to look at three of the Minor Prophets that I think of as being in that lowest level of the minors. They are all small books, but the thing that marks them out to me as unusual is that these are the only Old Testament prophets whose writings are not quoted in the New Testament. The three are Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah. Some believe that Nahum 1:15 is quoted in Romans 10:15, but I believe that verse actually quotes Isaiah 52:7.

So I think of these three, Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah, as being in the rookie leagues, the low minors. They are rarely studied, almost anonymous prophets who are practically

unknown to most Christians. I call this study “Thoughts From the Rookie Leagues.” Though the title of the series is intended to be a little humorous, the truth is these were godly men inspired by the Spirit of God and given a message by him. Typically the messages of these prophets aren't the most inspiring. They are kind of the Debbie Downers of biblical books because they're all about judgment. Yet they each have something to say to us. They spoke directly to conditions and situations in their day, but their message still has something for us to understand today. Today we will look at Obadiah.

EDOM HAD AN “I” PROBLEM

Verse 1 of Obadiah (which is only one chapter long) says, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says about Edom.” The subject of this book is the nation of Edom. Who was Edom? That's the country that produces that cheese that's kind of like Gouda, right? No, that would be Edam cheese, and it has nothing to do with Edom. This goes back to the book of Genesis. The Lord promised a son to Abraham and Sarah, and after many years that son was born. His name was Isaac. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twins, Esau and Jacob. Genesis 25:25 says of the twins, “the first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment, so they named him Esau.” Esau meant “hairy” in Hebrew. But “Hairy,” or Esau, would eventually get another name, a nickname.

The San Francisco Giants have a third baseman named Pablo Sandoval who is, shall we say, something less than svelte. Yet several years ago he made a play in which he showed remarkable agility. One of his teammates said he looked like Kung Fu Panda, the animated movie character that was very rotund yet astoundingly agile. The nickname stuck, and now he is Panda. He got a nickname from something he did. That happened to Esau too. He was likely red haired, so it was natural that he got the nickname red. That got cemented later when he sold his birthright to his younger twin, Jacob, for some stew that was red. Probably some chili. I can imagine how that happened. His friends would see him and say, “Hey, Red, had any red stew lately?” as a way of kidding him for making a really bad decision. The Hebrew word for red is Edom. From that point on Esau was Edom.

The nation of Edom were the descendants Esau, just like the nation of Israel was the descendants of Jacob. From the very beginning there was rivalry between Edom and Israel. Edom was actually closely related to Israel. They literally were cousins, but Edom really didn't like Israel, perhaps going back to a sense of offense that they weren't the “chosen ones.”

Verse 3 tells us what Edom's issue was. “The pride of your heart has deceived you.” At the core their problem was pride. That pride can be seen in several ways in this book. First they were sure that no one could ever hurt them. At the end of verse 3 Obadiah says

of them, “You who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’” In other words, “who can defeat me?” They thought they couldn’t be threatened by anyone.

Edom was situated in some very rugged territory to the south of the Dead Sea. They had a stronghold that we know today as Petra. This was a city that could only be approached through a narrow canyon only a few yards wide. Its inhabitants thought because of its geography it was impregnable. As Obadiah says in verse 3 they lived “in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights.”

Edom was in conflict with Israel throughout its history. In that conflict their pride revealed itself. Their pride and self-sufficiency combined with their hatred of Israel resulted in some ugly attitudes and actions. Most likely Obadiah was written after the Babylonian attacks against Judah beginning around 605 B.C. Verse 11 tells us what happened then. “On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his (Israel’s) wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them.” Verse 12 says they rejoiced over the misfortune of Israel.

The description goes on in verse 13 to say that they looked down on Israel in their calamity and even joined in by seizing some of their wealth for themselves. They saw themselves as better than Israel and told themselves that the Judeans got what was coming to them. They deserved it.

EDOM WOULD PAY A PRICE

The message of Obadiah was that Edom would pay for their arrogance. In verse 2 the “Sovereign Lord” says “See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly despised.” In other words, bad things were about to happen to these proud people. In verse 5 the Lord says that if thieves came to you “would they not steal only as much as they wanted?” Have you ever been robbed? It has happened to me several times. It happened twice when I was single living in apartments in my years after college. It happened once when Laurie and I were staying in a hotel with family members up in Santa Barbara. While we were there someone got into our hotel room and stole some cash from us.

In all three of those incidents the thieves took things that belonged to us, but they didn’t take everything that we had. In those apartments they left most of my clothes. I guess that was a comment of sorts on my wardrobe. They didn’t think my clothes were worth having. In the hotel incident they took cash, but that was all. The message of Obadiah was that what was about to happen to Edom would be worse, for they would be left with nothing. A thief will leave something, but the Lord was going to wipe out everything. He said the grape pickers do not pick every single grape, but in the case of Edom there was going to be absolutely nothing left.

Verses 8-9 explain the coming judgment quite clearly. “Will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau? Your warriors, O Teman, will be terrified, and everyone in Esau’s mountains will be cut down in the slaughter.” Teman was an Edomite clan and a name sometimes used for Edom.

To rub it in verses 20-21 say, “the company of Israelite exiles who are in Canaan will possess the land as far as Zaraphath; the exiles from Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will possess the towns of the Negev. Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom will be the Lord’s.” The point is Israel is going to survive and will actually rule over Edom.

We don’t know precisely what happened to Edom historically. What we do know is that these prophecies were apparently fulfilled because Edom ceased to exist as a nation and the Edomites faded from history.

IMPLICATIONS

That’s mildly interesting, I suppose, but so what? What does this have to do with us? We’re not Edom. So what if the heart of their problem was pride? There are some important lessons for us in the example of Edom. In order to apply the lessons of this book to our lives here is what we need to do. We should:

REMEMBER THE DANGER OF PRIDE

God makes a large issue of pride. It’s not just in Obadiah. It is a message writ large throughout the Bible. James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” In case you didn’t get the message 1 Peter 5:5 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” How do you think God feels about pride? Proverbs 6:16 says there are 6 things that God hates. No, wait, it’s 7, the verse says. In verse 17 the first on the list is “haughty eyes.” In other words, pride.

What do you hate? You know I hate cilantro. I went to the website ihatecilantro.com this week. It opens with “Cilantro, the most offensive food known to man. No normally functioning human being would ever in a lifetime consider cilantro edible.” Amen. I hate it. How would you like it if God hated something about you so much that he couldn’t stand you and avoided you the way I avoid cilantro? God hates pride like that. If you have pride God is against you. Why is God so opposed to pride?

Let’s think for a moment about what pride is. Not all pride is wrong. We got a text from Toby while he and Anna were on vacation. In the text he said, “Anna has learned how to surf.” Laurie and I have taken a surfing lesson in which we were able to stand up and ride multiple waves. So you could say we have learned how to surf. However, what neither of us can do is hang out there in the lineup, start paddling, catch a wave then stand up and

ride it. Toby told us Anna had been able to paddle in, catch a wave and actually turn her board to ride the wave. He was really proud of her. Was that wrong? No, that's appropriate celebration of the achievements of another person. That is a form of pride, but it is a healthy and godly pride.

Recently I was taking dishes out of our dishwasher and I suddenly felt a little bit of pride. This is the third dishwasher we've had in our home. The reason I take pride in it is that Laurie and I installed it ourselves. Yes, that's right, the master of disaster himself, the superhero, "Useless Man," actually used tools, followed the directions and along with his wife put this machine in and hooked it up to our plumbing. The amazing part is it works. This is irrefutable proof that God works miracles still today. My ineptitude when it comes to anything mechanical knows no limits. So I take great satisfaction every time that machine actually works and doesn't spew water all over the kitchen. Is God opposed to that? No, it is fine to feel satisfaction that you were able to accomplish a difficult task. That only becomes a problem when we try to attach some sense of our value to it or think that makes us better than others. If I think I am more valuable or worthy of praise because I was able to help install a dishwasher then it becomes a problem.

The kind of pride that God is opposed to has its focus on "I" or "me." Pride says:

- **I know what is best.** I should be able to determine what I need in life and what the best choice is for me. I know better than God even what will make my life work.
- **I should be honored.** People should notice me, should approve of me and give me praise. I am better than other people and this should be acknowledged.
- **I should be loved and served.** I deserve to get what I want and people should see to it that I do.

Why does God hate pride? Why is it such a big problem in his eyes? C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind." He went on to say that all the kinds of things we tend to focus on like sexual sin, anger, greed and drunkenness "are mere flea bites in comparison." Pride, he said, is the "utmost evil," and is the cause of all of the misery in every nation and every family since the world began.

The late John Stott said much the same thing. He said that pride is the essence of all sin. Jonathan Edwards said pride is the "worst viper in the heart." It is a snake that is poisonous! How would you react if you encountered the most poisonous, deadly snake on the planet? Would you play with it? Would you welcome it? Pride is that snake! We should avoid it like a deadly snake.

Suppose that God says to you that you can eat of the produce of any plant that you can find, with one exception. There is one particular plant whose fruit you may never eat. But inside you are thinking, “I know what is best for me. I should be able to eat whatever I want because I know what I need.” That fatal disobedience starts with pride, the attitude that says I know what is best.

Pick anything the Bible calls sin or think of anything that you consider to be wrong. Whatever it is it starts with pride. Consider greed, currently on the list of not acceptable vices because all those Wall Street one percenters are greedy and of course the rest of us aren't. What gives rise to greed? Somewhere the greedy person has decided that he or she should get whatever he or she wants and should have more of it than anyone else. Remember that pride thinks it should get whatever it wants and deserves more of it than other people. That's the beginning of greed.

The abusive person thinks himself better than others so he has the right to mistreat others in ways he would never accept for himself. The husband who cheats on his wife is first proud. He thinks he knows what is best for him better than God, and he thinks his “needs” are more important than the needs of his wife and children. The thief who stole money from Laurie and me thought he was more important than we were, that his desire for the money was all that mattered.

C. S. Lewis also said that pride always means enmity. It will inevitably produce animosity and war. It will produce enmity between us and God and it will produce it between people. Put two people in a room, both of whom think they should be honored and they should be served. What is going to happen? It will not be long before war breaks out. Pride destroys the possibility of real love between people. It also destroys the possibility of contentment and satisfaction. It even makes us do irrational things as evidenced by Adam and Eve. One of the effects of pride is to make us fearful and defensive. Pride totally destroys inner peace.

Pride has two inevitable and terrible effects: First, it puts us at war with God because we sit in judgment on him. Our pride tells us that we have the right to decide whether God's command is for our good or not. We become the judge over Almighty God! Second, it puts us at war with people. Our pride says, “I am what matters; I am what life is about.” That means we have the starring role in life and everyone else is at best a supporting actor and maybe only a bit player, and heaven help them if they don't play their role right.

Do you remember what Jesus said when he was asked what the greatest commandment was? He said there are two: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and

second, Love your neighbor the way you love yourself. Pride keeps us from doing either one!

RECOGNIZE THE PRESENCE OF PRIDE

No one likes to think of himself as proud or arrogant. We look at Edom and say, “Well I’m not like them so this doesn’t apply to me.” Remember that pride is an “I” problem. That is a problem that we all have. In his book, *Perilous Pursuits*, Joe Stowell wrote that “Pride is the assumption that I am the most important person in my world.” Now you might think that you don’t believe that, but you do. What reveals that is what occupies your thoughts. They are all about you. You think as though all of life revolves around you. We all do. We can’t help it. When you see a picture of a group that includes you, what do you look at? You look first to see how you look. When a new law is passed in Congress or our Legislature, one that’s a big deal and gets a lot of publicity, when you hear about it what is your first question? How does this affect me? That’s human, thinking I am what matters most of all. And that means we are all proud. It is there in every single one of us.

In his book, *Humility* (p. 29), C. J. Mahaney wrote, “none of us are immune to the logic-defying, blinding effects of pride. Though it shows up in different forms and to differing degrees, it infects us all. The real issue here is not *if* pride exists in your heart; it’s *where* pride exists and *how* pride is being expressed in your life.” Unfortunately since Adam and Eve fouled things up in Eden, pride has been a part of every human’s spiritual DNA. If you have human DNA, you have pride, the kind God hates.

What are some symptoms of pride? Do you ever decide to go your own way rather than doing God’s will? That starts with pride. It starts with thinking that you know what is best. If you ever disobey God even in a small way, somewhere you have decided you know better. You are proud.

Do you ever find yourself longing for notice, acclaim or approval in any way? I recently was in the doctor’s office because I’m still dealing with a very annoying problem with my elbow. They always start by weighing you and checking your pulse and blood pressure. This most recent visit the nurse said that my pulse rate and my blood pressure are excellent. She said I must be taking very good care of myself because they both are such good numbers. Instantly there’s a part of me that said, “That’s right, I’m a blood pressure champ.” Pride turns anything and everything into a competition, an opportunity to elevate myself above others and demand recognition. It’s always helpful to me to remember that I’m at a point in life where every compliment has the “for your age” caveat attached to it. But the point is that’s just an ever present desire. My pride wants notice, credit, praise, pats on the back, and acknowledgment that I am superior.

I mentioned before a couple of years ago when I had an appointment scheduled with another doctor the receptionist called me a day before and said they needed to reschedule me. I was quite accommodating and said the new time would be fine. The receptionist said, "Thank you, that's a big help. You're awesome." I thought, "Good to know that someone can see the truth." Yeah, it felt way too good. Pride.

Recently Laurie and I were out in public after we had eaten a meal and she said to me, "Rick you've got something in your teeth." I couldn't get it out. I became self-conscious. I didn't want to smile a lot because I didn't want people looking at me thinking, "Wow, his daughter and son in law live in Mississippi but he clearly is the one who ought to live there." That self-consciousness is a function of my pride. That's what pride does to us. It utterly obliterates peace and our ability to really think about others.

How do you feel when someone criticizes you? How do you feel when you are snubbed, when others take no notice of you? Do you feel depressed because they have not given you your due recognition? Do you feel the hackles rise when you are criticized or when someone assumes that you don't know what you're talking about? That is evidence of pride!

Laurie had her recital for her music students two weeks ago. We saw again something that is unavoidable for humans. Kids who had their pieces down perfectly suddenly couldn't remember what to do. There were 35 people there, but just being in front of people causes our minds to blank out. Adrenaline does that to us when combined with pride.

Do you ever look down on other people or realize that you find it awfully easy to find fault with them? That is another telltale sign of pride. Do you ever complain? When you are complaining you are saying, "I deserve better." If you come at this from a truly theologically true perspective you will be saying, "I deserve nothing more than eternal punishment, beginning immediately." Anything better than that is grace. The truth is when we are even discontent we are saying, "I deserve better. I should have it." That is pride. Do you ever find yourself unmotivated to pray? When we don't pray we are saying, "I don't need God. I can handle this myself." That's another telltale sign of pride. It is there in all of us. It can range from subtle to blatant, but it is there and it is insidious.

RID OURSELVES OF PRIDE

As they say in Jamaica, "no problem, mon." I just choose not to be proud anymore and boom, done deal, pride is gone, right? I wish that were true. Benjamin Franklin wrote, "There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility."

Yet the Bible tells us to humble ourselves before God. That is getting rid of pride. So what can we do to help us defeat this snake in our hearts? We've already considered the first step. It is admitting it is there and it is a problem. I'm not going to think I need to deal with pride unless I admit it is a problem for me, so start there. We can ask God to humble us. That, of course, can be a painful step. God will answer that prayer and it can be a difficult and humiliating process.

Focus on the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ utterly obliterates pride. It shouts to us that far from having something to be proud of, our guilt is so great it required that most extreme of measures to rescue us from ourselves. The cross says to us that we could not rescue ourselves; it required a divine work to do it.

Years ago when I was living in the LA area I came to San Diego with a group of friends. We went to Mission Beach and dove into the water. We were too dumb to realize that the surf was a little dangerous that day, or maybe a little too proud. What young guy wants to admit he's afraid to go out when others are doing it? We got out in the water and realized the rip was strong and there was a powerful current running south. We decided to swim in, but found out it was easier said than done. I remember finally putting my head down and swimming hard for quite some time then looking up to discover I'd made almost no progress toward shore. With renewed effort I tried to catch a wave and swam even harder. I grew tired but kept going. I was nearing the end of my strength when I paused, and could touch the bottom! I was almost home. With a last burst of effort I made it to the place where I could stand and managed to struggle onto the beach, totally exhausted. One of my friends wasn't so lucky. He couldn't get in and he was being quickly swept down the beach by the current. He was running out of gas and now was very concerned because he was nearing the jetty at the south end of that beach. He saw the big waves crashing onto those boulders and envisioned himself being thrown onto those rocks. He was in trouble but could no longer help himself. He was near despair when a lifeguard showed up. He had him hold onto his flotation device and he towed him to shore.

When they got to the beach my friend told me he felt two things. First he felt enormous gratitude to the lifeguard for saving his life, because without him he was dead. Second, he felt embarrassment. Everyone notices when a lifeguard dashes into the water. My friend got to walk onto the beach with all those people, among them lots of young women, looking on to see the college age guy who had to be rescued. He said it was humiliating. There is nothing to be proud about when all you've done is be rescued when you were helpless. At the cross there is no room for pride whatsoever!

Be consumed by the glory of God. Sometimes people think that humility is about having a proper view of oneself. I don't think that is right. Real humility is basically not caring about one's status or image at all. It is being so caught up in the glory of God that what I think about myself or anyone else thinks about me is of no consequence. It just

doesn't matter at all. Again in his book, *Perilous Pursuits* (p. 145), Joe Stowell wrote that true humility is not an act of our will, it is not something we manufacture. It is "a byproduct of being consumed with Christ's supremacy."

It's a long story how this happened, but while in grad school I played on a really high powered flag football team that included a number of former NFL and college players. I played on that team for two seasons and in those seasons we only lost 1 game and won 2 championships. I don't recall much about those games, but one sticks out. I know we won the game, but that wasn't what made it memorable. What made it memorable was that it was a night game and it rained throughout the game. I don't mean a little mist or sprinkle. It was a deluge. I was miserably cold and soaked to the bone. And I was covered in mud. This was not just a matter of a few muddy spots on me. It was everywhere. This was 'gross me out, don't let that guy in the house and hose him off before he gets anywhere near us' muddy. I looked terrible and felt miserable. And I didn't care. It was all about winning that football game. That goal was what mattered. So I didn't care how I looked. I wasn't concerned that the beautiful girl I cared about so much might see me and decide I looked too awful to bear. I didn't care what people would think. It was about winning the game. The goal eclipsed the things my pride might raise as issues. What if we were to become so focused on, so enraptured by the glory of God, that it became the only thing that mattered. Our pride would melt away as we pursued the only thing that matters.

Here are a couple of activities that can help you with your pride. Give thanks. See everything that happens in your life as a gift of grace. Second, look for evidence of the grace of God in other people and jump on the opportunity to talk about it.