

Justice and Mercy
II Chronicles 21:4-20; Obadiah

“You can’t vote for him for President. He’s hopelessly corrupt, accepting bribes for doing favors for big corporations. If we could just see all of the correspondence that he refuses to publish, you’d know all of this is true.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, what about your candidate? He’s morally unfit for public office. Everyone knows about his drinking, partying past – and he has admitted to having sexual relations outside of marriage, and even fathered a child in the process!”

Sound familiar? Well, all of these accusations were in fact exchanged during the Presidential campaign of – 1884. James G. Blaine was the Republican candidate, but more than a few rumors alleged that he had used his position as Speaker of the House to make sure that a rich railroad company got a big grant of land in return for substantial financial rewards. On the other hand, Grover Cleveland, the Democrat candidate, admitted that he had in fact been, um, intimate with a widow in Buffalo, but insisted that he had assumed responsibility for the child she bore at the time.

In short, neither candidate was without his flaws. And since Lord Acton famously warned us that power tends to corrupt those who wield it, perhaps we should not be surprised at the failures and foibles of so many of our more modern politicians, regardless of their party affiliation. Yes, all too often, when we Americans go into the voting booth, we are faced with a choice not between good and bad, but between bad and worse.

That was certainly the case in the days of King Jehoram of Judah, who abandoned the faithful ways of his grandfather Asa and his father Jehoshaphat, choosing instead to follow the example of the wicked King Ahab of Israel – for after all, he had married Ahab’s daughter. Yes, Jehoram turned away from the Lord, encouraging his people to worship other gods on high places throughout his kingdom.

And given such shameless infidelity, it’s no surprise that he was abusive to the people around him. In fact, he went so far as to murder all his brothers in order to secure his position on the throne. So surely Jehoram got what he deserved when the Philistines and the Arabs joined forces to sack Jerusalem, carrying off all of Jehoram’s wives and all but one of his sons. He was so obviously the villain of this story, if it were a Western, he’d be wearing a black hat.

So, doesn’t that mean that the Edomites, the descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau, were right to rebel against Jehoram and to establish themselves as an independent kingdom? Doesn’t that mean the Edomites were the guys in the white hats?

Well, we might think that, until we turn over to the book of Obadiah. For what does he tell us about the Edomites? It turns out that they were arrogant, proud of the wealth they attained from their strategic position athwart the trade routes that led to and from the northern end of the Red Sea. But while they grew rich from the commerce that passed through their territory, they also trusted in their mountainous geography to protect them from would-be invaders. No, in spite of their descent from Abraham and Isaac, they were no more faithful to the Lord’s covenant than Jehoram was.

And they were no more loving. For Obadiah goes on to condemn them for standing on the sidelines, watching while foreign invaders plundered their cousins in Jerusalem. “Do not gloat over your brother’s day, the day of his misfortune,” Obadiah warned. “Do not rejoice over the sons of Judah in the day of their destruction.” For no matter how much the Israelites may have deserved such disaster,

Obadiah warned the Edomites that they deserved the same sort of thing. Simply put, their hats were just as black as Jehoram's.

So, what can we learn from such a sad and sordid tale? Simply this: all those Westerners notwithstanding, there are very few times in human history when it's the good guys in the white hats against the bad guys in the black hats. For while we like to think of history as a series of victories of good over evil, it's all too often a parade of tragedies, with one bad ruler or situation following another. All too often, everyone is actually wearing a black hat.

Our modern American politicians of both parties need to learn this lesson, don't they? For they do their best to demonize their opponents, all the while conveniently ignoring their own failures and flaws. And we Christians aren't immune from the same sort of polarizing forces. For even though many of our theological disagreements are indeed important, it's so easy for us to slip into scorn or even hatred for fellow believers who don't observe the sacraments the way we do, or who don't organize themselves the same way that we do, or who don't read the Bible according to our Reformed confessions.

But if we take our Reformed theology seriously, we'll remember one of the important lessons that both of these passages underline for us, a lesson Paul makes clear in Romans 3:23: "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" No, if the Edomites were no more faithful to the Lord than wicked Jehoram was, we are no better than our Christian brothers and sisters who disagree with us or who have even hurt us. If this were a Western, we'd all be wearing black hats.

And make no mistake, both of these passages contain lots of bad news for all the guys in the black hats, for all those who turn away from God. Elijah, after all, minced no words with Jehoram: it was because Jehoram turned away from the faith of his fathers and worshipped false gods that his kingdom was conquered, his palace was ransacked and most of his family was carried off. Moreover, he himself ended up being afflicted with a terrible disease, suffering for two years and dying in great pain. And to add insult to injury, his subjects loathed him so much that they didn't even hold a funeral for him: as verse 20 says, "He departed with no one's regret." Oh, Jehoram may have been a fourth great-grandson of King David, but he was such an embarrassment that he wasn't buried anywhere near any of his ancestors. You can't sink much lower than that.

And Obadiah explained all the similarly terrible things that would happen to the Edomites. He promised that their arrogance would be replaced with shame, and that they would be cut off forever. Just as they stood by and watched the sack of Jerusalem, Obadiah said that their own kingdom would be ransacked and that their hidden treasures would be discovered. In fact, he went so far as to say that "there will be no survivor of the house of Esau."

And the fact is that everyone wearing a black hat, all those like Jehoram and the Edomites, all those who spurn God's covenant promises and reject His gracious pardon can expect the same sort of pain and shame. Simply put, what happened to Jehoram and the Edomites, indeed, what happened to Jesus on the cross will happen to those who remain in rebellion against Christ. For unless we trust in the sacrifice of Christ, we'll get to make that same sort of sacrifice for ourselves. As Paul reminded us in our responsive reading, sin reigns in death, for that's the only reward it can ever give to any of its followers.

But Obadiah also insisted that God would treat the people of Israel differently from the people of Edom. For if verse 18 says that the house of Esau will be like stubble set on fire, it also says that the

house of Jacob will be that fire and the house of Joseph will be that flame. But we've already seen that they weren't any less wicked than the Edomites – so why did God promise to bless them?

Moreover, the very next chapter of II Chronicles explains how, even though Jehoram only had one son left, that son got to succeed him on the throne of Judah. And II Kings 14 goes on to tell how Jehoram's great-grandson Amaziah would reconquer Edom, killing 10,000 of its people and capturing its capital, Sela. And Jehoram's great-great-grandson Uzziah would restore to the kingdom of Judah the Edomite port of Elath, which lay on the northern edge of the Red Sea. It was thus Jehoram's descendants who helped to fulfill God's word of judgment on the Edomites. So, why did the Lord bless the family of such a wicked man in this way?

Verse 7 of our passage from II Chronicles tells us: the Lord was not willing to destroy all the descendants of Jehoram because of the covenant God had made with his great-great-great-great grandfather, King David. For you see, no matter how wicked Jehoram may have been, he was indeed a direct lineal descendant of David, the rightful heir to David's throne. That's why God treated Jehoram differently from the Edomites, and from the other, equally wicked dynasties that followed each other on the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel. God guaranteed that Jehoram's family line would continue and would be blessed, not because of any goodness in Jehoram, but only because of a gracious promise God had made to David, well over one hundred years earlier.

And isn't that the same sort of thing that Paul told us in our responsive reading from Romans chapter 5? For he insists that none of us did anything to earn our salvation. No, we all started out helpless, spiritually dead in our sins. We all started out with black hats.

But it was while we were still ungodly, while we were still sinners that Christ, the Son of David, died for us. And so it is only because the Son of David lived a perfectly righteous life that the Father sees all His people as righteous. It is only because the Son of David obeyed the Father, laying down His life on the cross, that God accepts His sacrifice on behalf of all His people. Yes, it is only because the Son of David shed His blood that all who trust in Him are justified, declared to be holy and righteous, worthy to wear a white hat. And so we see, it is not any goodness in ourselves that saves us from the wrath of God, the punishment that all our sins deserve; by God's grace alone, we are saved by Christ alone.

Just so, it was only because Jehoram was connected to the Son of David as an ancestor of Jesus that his family line was preserved. In spite of Jehoram's obvious wickedness, God was faithful to His covenant promise to David, thus showing grace to Jehoram's family, grace that Jehoram certainly didn't deserve.

And so we see another illustration of the great contrast that we see in the cross of Christ: God's justice and God's mercy. For if we see in the cross the penalty that all our sins deserve, we also see that Christ paid that penalty. And as Paul tells us in our responsive reading, it is by faith that we are justified. It is by faith that His sacrifice is credited to our account. It is by faith that our penalty is fully paid. It is by faith that we are declared to be not guilty.

So, even if we have been as corrupt as James G. Blaine or as careless as Grover Cleveland, even if we have been as murderous as Paul for that matter, if we are trusting in Christ as Savior, we have nothing to fear. For through faith we have access to God's grace, the same grace that was extended to Jehoram's family, however unworthy any of them as individuals may have been.

Ah, but how do we know all this is true? Well, didn't Elijah correctly predict everything that was going to happen to Jehoram? And didn't Obadiah correctly predict everything that would happen to the

Edomites? Oh yes, if we can trust God to keep His promises to bring justice to the wicked, we can also trust the gracious covenant promises of God to all those who cling to the Son of David.

For Obadiah also made another prediction: that “on Mount Zion there will be those who escape, and it will be holy.” And he closed his prophecy with the promise that “the kingdom will be the Lord’s.” And that’s our hope as well. Because Christ offered Himself up on Mount Zion, all His people are considered to be holy and righteous. And when He returns to take up His kingdom, He will fully and finally set all things right and make all things new. Yes, that will be the only true triumph in all of human history. For only after that day will there be no more black hats, no more sin, no more death forever.

But until that day, let’s be as gracious with other unworthy sinners as Jesus has been with us. Let’s rely completely on His grace, trusting only in His covenant promises. Let us hope in His Word, which is always true and will never lead us astray. And let us continue to pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.”