

THE “AT LAST” PROPHET

Nahum

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We continue this summer series on the minor prophets as we look at the prophet Nahum, the seventh prophet following Daniel. Immediately after the prophet Micah. I’d like to read chapter 1 of Nahum, fifteen verses. Almost the totality of the message this morning is concerned with the first half of the first chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 are rather self-evident. I’ll comment on that later. “An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite” (Nahum 1:1, NIV).

Pause there for a moment. Probably that is a small town in Judea, south of Jerusalem. Some have suggested that since the town of Capernaum means “village of Nahum,” the town where Jesus did great acts of healing, that it may have been that Nahum lived in the town which later became named after him. We do not know that for sure.

“The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him. The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness.

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Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time. They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble. From you, O Nineveh, has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness. This is what the LORD says: ‘Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, O Judah, I will afflict you no more. Now I will now break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.’ The LORD has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: ‘You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.’ Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed” (Nahum 1:2–15, NIV).

When we pick up a prophecy like Nahum, we recognize as we do so that this is one of the prophets that Jesus taught his disciples about in the time following His resurrection from the dead. We learn, for example, in Luke 24:27 that as He was walking with the two disciples on the several-hour journey on the road to Emmaus, “He, beginning with Moses and all the prophets interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” When He was done with that interpretation of the prophets which included Nahum, the disciples related to the others later that their hearts burned within them. So we look to the same living Lord by his Spirit to make this word somehow burn in our hearts as well today. To preach about Nahum in many countries of the world today would be a very dangerous experience. It would be an experience which could result in a person’s arrest or even in some countries of the world bring immediate losing of the head. For Nahum’s name means “comfort” or “full of comfort” and he is bringing comfort to those who have been threatened by the stamping of the heel of a military dictatorship. He

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addresses the empire of Assyria, in the form of its capital city Nineveh, for his book is against Nineveh. He is concerned with the question, “When is God going to right the score? When is He going to settle accounts with evil and take down this great nation which has been built on the ruthless exploitation of others? Militarily, politically, and economically?” His book, a passionate book, three chapters in our Bible, is one great shout of two words—“At last!” For Nahum lived at the brink of a time in which God at last is going to address himself to Assyria. The prophecy is directed against this empire and capital city which in the eighth and seventh century before Christ was a tremendous, ruthless military power. One has only to survey the history of the world today and look at the composition of the United Nations to realize how much of the world today is made up of states that are exactly like Assyria in character.

Since the Book of Nahum is directed against that kind of government, we may say today that it is still directed ultimately against all governments that build on the ruthless exercise of military power and stamp out the freedom in the lives of others. We might also by application, and since our purpose is not simply to give an historical sketch of the past and present which will apply personally to our lives, might reckon also that this book has tremendous application for the individual who is cruel and godless. God has some very important things to say in that regard. It’s always vital in a prophetic book to look at the background and then be able to draw accurately the kind of lessons which the Holy Spirit has for us. Look at the background from which Nahum writes.

Nineveh is a great city. It is a city which has incredible defenses. We’re very concerned in our day about defenses. We kind of feel secure that the United States has a sophisticated and perhaps impenetrable defense system. Every great power which has existed in the world has thought the same thing. Nineveh thought that. They lived in a day without missiles or modern armaments of

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war. But they felt they had a city, which could not be taken. It was a city with walls a hundred feet high. Some seven and a half miles in circumference. The city which had a wall which was wide enough at the top that three chariots could drive abreast meaning that it was mammoth at the bottom. This wall protected them from the onslaught of foreign invaders, 1,200 defense towers ringed the wall. Outside the wall was a moat 140 feet wide and 60 feet deep. The city had its own water supply and adequate food supply to last it in any siege.

Yet with all of these great defenses it came to an end. It fell from its power within a matter of three decades. While Nahum writes this city feels it's invincible and invulnerable. But within years following this prophecy Nineveh would have been reduced to a heap of rubble. In fact three centuries later, after Nineveh fell in 612 B.C., Alexander the Great went through the area in which Nineveh was and could not even find the site on which the great city of Nineveh had stood, so great was its ruin.

Today in northern Iraq, where Nineveh would be located if it existed today, there is only a mound which commemorates the existence of Nineveh. The Mound of Many Sheep. Suggesting what the land is being devoted to today.

When we read something like this we come grips with an ancient word which has already had a fulfillment. In fact as you look at the prophet Nahum it is not looking forward to other events that have yet to happen for the future but Nahum is book that is self-contained. What it has prophesied has already come to pass. It's the kind of book which therefore gives us the assurance about all the Scripture when it speaks of events yet to come which have not yet come, that when Scripture speaks of a future event it speaks from a track record of credibility and authority. When Nahum prophesied against Assyria it was known in the world as ruthless in its military and economic exploitation of people. When a town fell to the Assyrians we have records to the fact

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that the king of Assyria’s throne would be set up at the gate of the city and prisoners from the city would then be paraded before him with the monarch of the city which had been defeated at the head of the parade. Sometimes the defeated king’s eyes were put out. Sargon, who captured the northern tribes of Israel, had paraded before him when he conquered Damascus the king of Damascus and he had him right in his presence buried alive. Wives and daughters of captured kings were put into harems. Those not of noble blood were sold into slavery.

While the procession was occurring before the conquering king of Assyria, meanwhile in the town Assyrian soldiers were massacring or impaling the population. It was their custom to bring the heads of victims into the king’s presence and stack them in piles and have the heads counted by the scribes. Surviving captives were either flayed or sometimes made to wear the head of other persons who had been decapitated. Some male prisoners were taken as slaves to work on building projects in Nineveh. It was a fierce town and ruled the world by might.

When it was destroyed in 612 B.C., it was destroyed in literal fulfillment of something Nahum had prophesied in 2:6 where he said “The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses” (NIV). For the way in which Nineveh finally came to an end was it was fed from rivers underneath its walls. In a time of tremendous flooding after about a two-year siege by the Medes and the Babylonians and the Scythians there was a great inundation and flood and so great were the waters going into the city that the pressure made a breach in the wall and the invading armies simply came in through (as Nahum had prophesied so accurately would occur) and took the town. Its pride, its elevation, its feeling that it was the best and would never be brought down is no more well described than in the words of its final king. He presided over the rapid fall of Assyria and almost without his knowledge his empire was crumbling apart. The Assyrian kings were great librarians and greatly interested in the collection of things written. They were

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continually making account of their exploits. One thing that this particular king did was he wrote a dedication on a brick temple which was built in Nineveh in which he describes himself. His description of himself is kind of a manifestation of why Nahum is giving the prophecy. This king says, “I am the great king, the mighty king. King of Assyria, king of the universe, king of the four regions of the world...” This king who said this of himself perished in flames when his city was sacked.

Writing from a small vantage point of the besieged territory called Judah, Nahum takes up this prophecy against Assyria. In regard to Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh, God manifests two responses which He has to all of mankind. The first response God has to all of mankind is found in a prophet earlier than Nahum, the prophet Jonah. Some 150 years before Nahum, Jonah had been told to go to Nineveh and prophesy that destruction was coming upon the city. He prophesied it, the city repented in sackcloth and fasting, and God spared the city. Jonah went outside of the town and pouted because God had spared the city. In the closing verse of the prophet Jonah, God speaks to Jonah and says to him that the reason why He spares the city is because of his love for that town. The phrase is used by God to the prophet, “Shall not I pity Nineveh, that great city?” (Jonah 4:11). “Shall not I pity Nineveh,” this militaristic society whose actions were so reprehensible to God let alone to mankind and yet God looked at the place, knows that there are human beings in it. He doesn’t see people simply as a blob, but as real living human people with living aspirations and hopes and dreams and the need for forgiveness, atonement and reconciliation with God. God looks at the city and tells his prophet, “I love Nineveh.”

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If you have ever wondered if God could love you, then the prophet Jonah’s words to Nineveh are an answer. If God could love this ancient wicked empire and its capital city surely He can love you and He surely does love you.

But when Jonah’s message went by and 150 years lapsed, we come to the prophet Nahum. His theme is not “Shall not I pity Nineveh.” His theme, according to 2:13, is “‘I am against you,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (NIV). If “Shall not the Lord have pity,” is a wonderful word to hear, then the words “Behold I am against you,” are an awesome word to hear. For when God is against there is no more opportunity for turning, reconciliation, or hope. The reason basically why there is a difference between Jonah and Nahum is that the years intervening these two prophets Nineveh did not continue in its repentance. It has repented in humility before God but as time went along they repented of their repentance. When we go back to the old way, the last end, as the Scripture says, becomes worse than the first. Such is the case with Assyria. As a nation it became far worse than it ever was when it initially repented under Jonah.

As I apply this on an individual basis I regret to say that continually I meet persons who at one point repented and come to faith in Christ and then have gone back. Gone back to the life from which they came when they came to Christ. Gone back to the old attitudes, the old friends, the old habits, the old addictions. Don’t do what Peter describes in 2 Peter 2:22, “The dog returns to his own vomit and the pig is washed only to wallow in the mire.”

The Book of Nahum is sober warning to not turn back but to continue in active repentance and humility to God. “Behold I am against you.” He’s indicated that Assyria has been a ruthless military power but is that the reason why God is against it? Nahum does not find his original answer, his basic answer simply in that Assyria had been ruthless. He finds that God is against Assyria because there is something in the nature of God which demands He be against it. Thus

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we’re only concerning ourselves with chapter 1 because in chapter 1 Nahum is presenting the theological reasons why God is against Assyria. Chapters 2 and 3 simply recount the siege and the sacking and the overthrow of the city. That’s pretty self evident as you read it, what is going on. But in chapter 1 he is advancing the reasons why God moved against Assyria. And by the way of implication when we understand why God moves against a power such as Assyria we understand that God will continue to move against powers like it which arise on the landscape of human history. And he will arise against individuals as well. These motivations.

I. Nahum first of all says the Lord is a jealous God.

I have to confess I’ve had real problems with that term in regard to God—jealous God. There have some who have said, when you read the Old Testament, you get an Old Testament God. A God of wrath, a God with a club. Some have said we must separate the new from the old because the concept of God can never merge. Of course when one carefully reads both the old and the new he finds that’s not true at all. There are two basic aspects of God which are revealed in the Scripture—both in the Old and in the New Testaments. But when we say God is jealous, what do we mean? If I preach a sermon that God wants you to be jealous—whoever heard of one of the fruits of the Spirit being jealousy?

When we think of jealousy simply from a human vantage point, we are thinking of something which another person has which we want. “I’m jealous because he’s got this and I don’t have this.” It’s akin to the concept of coveting. But when the word “jealous” is used of God it has a whole different context and meaning. It does not mean that God wants something that isn’t His. Rather, what the word “jealousy” means is that someone is attempting to take from God what is rightfully His and jealousy involves the idea that God is seeking to restore to himself what is His. God cannot be anything less than He is. If we try to take from Him what is His then we become

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less than we are. And we are incomplete. Jealousy therefore is God’s action to restore and to keep what is His.

God is a jealous God seeking to keep and restore what belongs to Him. What did Assyria take or attempt to take that belonged to God? One thing it certainly tried to do was it tried to say that it was the ruler. Scriptures say that the earth is the Lord’s. Assyria in its conquest kept taking land that didn’t really rightfully belong to it, that was God’s. It also took the lives of human beings, ruthlessly without warrant, without cause. God is the giver of life. God is jealous because *something* which belongs to Him, or *someone* who belongs to Him, is being taken.

Assyria also had encircled the people of God in Judah and besieged it seeking to take what was not theirs. God can even be jealous towards me. I am pulled with temptations to take from God what is rightfully His. God seeks to take measures so that I can be complete to keep what is His. The body is the Lord’s. That’s a hard lesson for me to learn because I tend to abuse it a lot—eating carelessly, exercising irregularly. Yet God takes such an interest in my body that He calls it His.

Part of my time—all my time belongs to him. When I remove from my schedule those moments of meeting with Him I am taking what belongs to Him and arrogating it to myself. Part of my money, if not all, belongs to Him. My relationships belong to Him as well. I am to treat others as though they belong to God and not to me. When I confuse it, God exercises His jealousy.

Someone has commented that every great person must meet three tests—the capacity for a great love, the capacity for a great enthusiasm, the capacity for a great indignation. Most of us only like to think of God in terms of the first two. He loves us greatly and when we speak of enthusiasm we speak of the length that God would go to on our behalf. But great people I’ve known have been great lovers, great zestful people who wanted to live and had a purpose for

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living and were enthused about life. And they also were people who, when things did not go well and someone were abused, had a capacity to be indignant about it. God shows three characteristics within him. He has the ability to love that surpasses our understanding. And God also has a capacity to hate that surpasses our understanding. God does not live in a twilight world but a world in which He clearly sees what is good and what is evil. He actively hates the evil and actively loves the person. Therefore He is jealous.

Take an inventory as you listen to this message today and ask yourself is there anything or anyone which you are attempting to take for myself which is really God's.

II. God is also described as avenging.

The Lord is a jealous God and avenging. This is why He is going to move against Assyria. Avenging does not carry the idea of simply retaliating, but rather avenging stands for a deeper fundamental law that what one sows one must also reap. For example, Nahum gives a tremendous example of that in 3:8. He asks Nineveh, “Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile?” (NIV). Thebes was a great Egyptian city—a beautiful palatial city which in 663 was besieged by the Assyrians and even though the city of Thebes was defensible and no one could ever take it, it fell. It was sacked and ruined by the Assyrians. Nahum simply says you came up against a city that was surrounded by water; its defenses could never be broken. You'll be dashed as you dashed that city. The way you conquered is the way you will be conquered. What you sow you reap.

God is therefore, according to the prophet Nahum, against any nation that acquires wealth and glory by slaughter and oppression. He is against any individual that seeks to cruelly dominate over another individual. God is irrevocable in His view in this matter.

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That’s why I said at the beginning, Nahum is a dangerous book. I can say this in a country that allows freedom of speech, but could you imagine me preaching this today in Uganda, Moscow, or Peking? A right-wing dictatorship? Can you imagine me saying these kind of things in a totalitarian society where the government has been built upon the ruthless exploitation of others? We are confident that God is the Lord of the universe. The military powers of our day will not be around forever. God will rule. The nations of this world shall become the nations of our God and of his Christ forever and ever.

One thing I appreciate about the Scriptures is they give us common people such an incredible expansive view of our destiny and of the destiny of the world. I am extremely insignificant but I know what’s going to happen and you know what’s going to happen. God is also described as being wrathful. That does not carry the idea of his being ticked off, kind of making a spur of the moment decision to go get somebody. But rather describes a settled disposition against sin.

III. He is also described as being slow to anger.

Or “slow of nostrils.” In other words, angry breathing comes in short rapid breaths, but a gentler disposition goes with being slow of nostrils or slow of breath. Therefore the reason why God has not pounced on Assyria earlier is not only is He jealous and avenging and wrathful but that is counterbalanced by His great mercy and His love. Slow of anger.

The saints have a real problem with the slowness. We say, “God why don’t you do something immediately?” But God, because He loves the civilization that is going to be judged, waits. Peter picked up on this same thing in the New Testament when He talks about those who scoff at the delay of the Lord’s return. He says the only reason that the Lord delays, is He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. God is slow to anger.

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Therefore since He is slow of anger how utterly evil an evil one or nation must be before God expresses His anger against that persons or nation.

IV. He is described also as being of great might and of not clearing the guilty.

Nahum and his prophecy goes on to speak of the fact that when God reaches the point of no return, when His judgment is going to be imposed, nothing could stand in His way. Nahum is one of the most vivid of all the prophets in his use of words. He describes in the 1:3–5 what happens when God moves. Nature itself is affected in whirlwinds and storms. The sea is rebuked and made dry. The mountains wither. The mountains quake. The earth is laid waste. It’s striking that when the Old Testament speaks of God as blessing men, nature joins in in gladness. The heavens are glad, the sea roars, the fields exalt, the trees of the field sing for joy, because God is blessing His people. There seems to be an interlink—God’s blessing on mankind reflected in His blessing on nature and God’s judgment of mankind reflected in His judgment upon nature. Thus when Jesus describes His own return He speaks of that day as the heavens and the earth being shaken because this earth on which we live is caught up with us in God’s anger or in God’s love. If mountains quake before him then ought also men? That’s what Nahum says to Assyria. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? Who indeed can stand before a holy God? Who would have the audacity to stand before the holy God?

Nahum prophesies of the inevitability of God’s action on Assyria that when God says “At last!” there is no turning Him back. He will, according to Nahum, not have to take vengeance twice—1:9—but it will be simply accomplished the first time.

Life is kind of a standing in line to meet one’s destiny. The kinds of decisions we make find us in an irrevocable kind of commitment to God or to the fact that God pours out His wrath. Scriptures know no in between. Scriptures know salvation or damnation, Scriptures know heaven or hell.

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But there is no in between place. One commits himself to his destiny. But Nahum does not leave us simply on the dark side. Assyria is left on the dark side because it has so totally rebelled against God that it chooses not to come to any place of forgiveness. In 1:15 Nahum gives this elevated theme which is picked up in the New Testament “Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace” (NIV), a watchman on the wall, watching a diplomatic courier come with the news. Is there an army coming against us or do they come in peace? Someone would watch the runner coming. If he brought peace, what good tidings those really were. Paul says “Blessed are those who are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (see Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15). We are God’s runners in the world, saying there’s peace. What is peace? From the standpoint of Scripture peace is not simply the absence of conflict. Peace is wholeness, soundness, integrity, unity, being all that God meant you to be. At rest with God, with others, and with yourself. Complete *shalom*. Behold him who brings peace.

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, we have now opened our hearts to you. We’ve sought in these moments to be as learners. To hear the voice of the Son of God break the Scriptures to us through you so that our hearts might burn within us. There is that wave of feeling, Lord, that does come within us when we recognize who you are. You’re stronger than the mightiest city. You’re greater than the mightiest nation. You above all power and all authority have counseled within yourself to be friends to us and to bring us peace. We simply thank you from our hearts and our lips say hallelujah to thee O Lord. In Jesus’ name. Amen.