

## The Power and Promise of God

Nahum 1:1-15

### Introduction:

**Prophetic:** We're still in the Minor Prophets (enjoyable series; "minor" because they're *short* not *unimportant*). These are **prophets**. The power of a prophet is not just that they forecast the future but they see the truth when no one else does. It is often their ability to stand alone that marks them as "prophetic."

- 3D Magic Eye Puzzle. It's really there, you just have to have the "eyes to see."
- E.g. David and Goliath: hindsight makes him a hero but in the moment everyone thought he was crazy.

**Nahum:** And today we come to a particularly *obscure* one: **Nahum**. Nahum from Elkosh (the problem is we don't know where Elkosh is; next vacation destination). It's one of the more judgment-heavy, violent, and graphic books in the Bible.

**Assyria:** This is a collection of poems *written* to predict the downfall of Nineveh and the salvation of God's people. The other major (important) Minor prophet that focuses on Nineveh is Jonah, written some 150 years prior to Nahum. Jonah focuses on the responsibility of God's people to extend grace to everyone and the possibility that the nations would repent and be saved.

- Nahum is sort of a delayed sequel showing what happens when the nations *don't* repent and, instead, persist in their rebellion to God (perhaps a change in Assyrian leadership, short-lived repentance, revert, recidivism, etc.).

Let me remind you of the wickedness of the Assyrians (of which Nineveh was their capital city, the largest city of the day).

- One historian calls them "Lords of Torture" because they not only mastered warfare (building the biggest empire of their day), "intentionally advertised their brutality as part of psychological warfare" (cut off limbs, gouged out eyes, impaling victims on large stakes).
- *Contra* Babylon (who eventually destroyed Assyria). Babylon subdued enemies through deportation of the elite and confiscation of wealth but left them intact for continued tribute. Assyrians depopulated areas, wiping them clean to avoid any future uprising (cf. *Assyrian vs. Babylonian Captivities; Israel vs. Judah; North vs. South*).
  - We'll just look at Nahum 1 (and use parts of chs. 2 and 3 to supplement the main point).

These are the oppressors of God's people. Their wickedness appears to mock the promise of God to his people (cf. Ps 73). But Nahum is a reminder of what's really going on, who's really in charge, and what we, as God's people, are called to do (trust the power and promises of God).

### 1. God's Undeniable Power (1:1-5)

<sup>1</sup> An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh. <sup>2</sup> The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. <sup>3</sup> The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. <sup>4</sup> He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. <sup>5</sup> The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it.

**Temporary Power:** At the moment, on the surface, it seems like the Assyrians are “master’s of their own fate.” They have the power, the wealth, the authority. **But Nahum sees who’s really in charge.** It is not that God *can’t* defeat and destroy the Assyrians, it’s just that he is being patient (the LORD is slow to anger).

- Ch. 2 makes clear that all the power of Nineveh will be washed away. Their temporary position is nothing to be marveled at.
  - It’s not gonna last. It’s not sustainable (credit card in college, can’t sustain this spending). The wickedness of Assyria is eventually going to cannibalize itself.
- <sup>8</sup> Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. “Halt! Halt!” they cry, but none turns back. <sup>9</sup> Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things. <sup>10</sup> Desolate! Desolation and ruin! Hearts melt and knees tremble; anguish is in all loins; all faces grow pale! (2:8-10).
- <sup>7</sup> And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, “Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?” Where shall I seek comforters for you? (3:7).
- Who’s really in charge? **God is.** Don’t get it twisted. Don’t despair.

**The Cross:** Despite what it appears, Assyria does not have the final word. Their power is a temporary allowance from God, not evidence of their autonomy or self-determination. Everything they have is by permission of God.

- Don’t be discouraged by appearances.

We must look no further than Jesus on the cross. From all outward appearances he is losing! Yet, we know he has the power all along. No one takes his life from him, he lays it down of his own accord (Jn 10). And what appears to so many as a loss is actually a win. He conquers through his death.

- Be careful that you don’t get too wrapped up in your circumstances. Your perspective is limited. Your circumstances will change. God never changes.
- <sup>7</sup> For we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).
- The cross is evidence that our faith is not just wishful thinking. In the midst of trying circumstances, when evil seems to have the upper hand, we can trust the promise of God that he will rescue us.
- Faith is not empty hope but obedient trust. E.g. Indiana Jones “Leap of Faith” (so much chest hair). He has to take a “blind step” (he can’t see) but he has instructions. He has to trust that the instructions are true. “The gospel moves at the speed of trust” (Hanevich).
  - Faith is knowing what God says, not being able to see it for yourself, but trusting him more than what you see.

**Historical Perspective:** We have the benefit of **historical hindsight**. This great empire, the greatest up until that point of history, was destroyed (just like Nahum prophesied). In fact, outside of the Bible's testimony, there was no physical evidence of the Assyrian Empire for more than 2000 years. It wasn't until 1842 that archeologists finally unearthed physical evidence of Assyria.

- The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Is 40:8; 1 Pet 1:24).
  - Isaiah writes under the greatest empire to that point (Assyria), Peter writes under the greatest empire to that point (Rome). Each has come and gone, yet God and his word remains. This is true also of Babylon, Britain, and America. All human kingdoms will fall but God will remain.
  - Nineveh becomes a picture of all the wicked empires and oppressive regimes and any sinful person opposing God and his people.

**Enemies of God:** The Ninevites are in a dangerous position. In their pride, they fail to see the seriousness of their opposition to God. <sup>2</sup> The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. <sup>3</sup> The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. Echoes of Exodus: <sup>6</sup> The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Ex 34:6-7).

- <sup>13</sup> Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard (2:13).
- <sup>5</sup> Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame (3:5).

It is a dangerous thing for God to be "against you." More serious words cannot be spoken.

**Great in Power:** Who do they think they are messing with? This isn't some regional deity. He's not some household idol. He is the creator of all that is. He is not to be trifled with. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. <sup>4</sup> He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. <sup>5</sup> The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it.

**Enduring Significance:** It is a fool's errand to oppose God. They've gotten comfortable with thinking they "are somebody." They have started to believe their own hype.

- The fall of Nineveh is an example and a reminder that God won't allow arrogant and violent empires to endure. Maybe not on your timetable, but in his, all injustice will be sorted out. All pride will be destroyed.
  - Assyria is in a long line of violent empires that have fallen to history.

- Assyria is a picture of hope in the wrong thing, of false hope in earthly power.
  - Go to the capitol (Washington D.C.). It's filled with pictures and statues to dead people, fallen leaders. Empires crumble (e.g., Roman Coliseum, Greek Parthenon, etc.). The highest of heights are still dead.
- It is a grace of God to have the truth of destruction clearly explained.
  - I am not in charge. You are not in charge. Our politicians and celebrities are not in charge. **Only God is in charge!**
  - We've been sold and marketed that we can really be the master's of our own fate. That we can manifest our own success. That we can discover within ourselves our own purpose and happiness. We can't. True purpose and happiness is only found in submission to the God that loves us and made us.

## 2. God's Unchanging Character (1:6-11)

<sup>6</sup> Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. <sup>7</sup> The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. <sup>8</sup> But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness. <sup>9</sup> What do you plot against the LORD? He will make a complete end; trouble will not rise up a second time. <sup>10</sup> For they are like entangled thorns, like drunkards as they drink; they are consumed like stubble fully dried. <sup>11</sup> From you came one who plotted evil against the LORD, a worthless counselor.

**Character:** We've already seen the testimony of God's character. He is both slow to anger and great in power. He is not capricious or malicious. He is gracious and merciful. But, he also will not let sin go unpunished. He is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies.

- In all of this, he is unequivocally good.
  - In fact, the English word "God" comes from the word "good." God is the definition and essence of goodness. He is good because he provides **refuge** in troubled times and he is good because he **punishes** evil.
    - Like the story of **Joseph**, he can bring good out of evil. As Paul reminds us, he works all things for good.

How do we reconcile his **vengeance** and his **goodness**?

- In fact, the Bible tells us *not* to seek vengeance. We are called to love our enemies and leave vengeance to God (Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30; Deut 32:35).
- It is precisely because God is God that he can take vengeance on his enemies and it is precisely because we are not God that we can't be trusted to enact vengeance.
  - Oprah famously remarked that she couldn't believe the God of the Bible because it says that God is jealous. This simplistic reading makes me wonder if she read the whole thing. God is not jealous like we're jealous because he is not sinful like we're sinful. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, so his jealousy can't be poisoned by the insecurity, suspicion, and selfishness that contaminates ours.

- God's jealousy and vengeance come from the same place as his love. He is not jealous like a baseball fan is when he sees someone wearing a rival team's jersey (e.g., jealous like an oncologist whose patient eschews treatment for coffee enema's and crystals).
- God loves us with perfect love and he wants what's best for us. And what's best for us is him.

**Patience:** Interestingly, lots of folks who blush at the notion of God's vengeance also struggle regarding his patience. They want *their* enemies punished *now* and their wickedness fixed *immediately*.

- We like when God is "slow to anger" toward us but not to anyone else.
- If God is in charge, why are his people in bondage to Assyria? Why is God taking his time? What is he waiting for?
- Why does God take his time?
  - <sup>7</sup> But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. <sup>8</sup> But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (2 Pet 3:7-10).
- God is merciful and just. He gives every opportunity for repentance (even of the Ninevites) but he will punish sin. Repentance is always an option.
  - He's not slow, he's patient and merciful. **If we were the Ninevites** (which, in our sin, we are), then we'd want God's patience.
- Learning to trust God's promise and plan, even while we wait, is a part of growing in faith. Learning to enjoy his mercy, to patiently endure, and to trust his plan is true contentment.
  - God gives you what you ask for in prayer or what you would have asked for if you knew what he knew (Keller). Your job is to trust that when he says "no" to your request, or "wait," he is still just as loving and just as good as if he said "yes" when you wanted.

**Refuge:** <sup>7</sup> The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. God knows those who trust in him and those who reject him. He will judge those who turn from him but he will rescue those who trust him, who turn from themselves, their idols and worship him alone.

- There is a dividing line: either you place your faith in God and are saved or you place your faith elsewhere and you are destroyed.
- The text is making it abundantly clear that no one holds a candle to God. No one can be in his presence unscathed. The only way to stand before God is if he allows you to.

- **There is no refuge from him, only refuge in him.** God is the one that sends the storm and is the only one that can shelter us from it. God is the judge that pronounces the sentence and the Savior that substitutes himself to pay our sin.
- God's judgment on evil is good news (unless you're Nineveh)
  - God's love is behind his wrath. He loves us enough to punish evil but he also bears the weight of judgment on himself for those who take refuge in him.

**Where Do You Find Refuge?:** This should force us to trust God, to depend on God (not ourselves or anything else).

- **This should keep us from trusting in false things.** Even for those that know better, we are tempted to put our hope in money, experiences, accomplishments, hustle, intellect, etc.
  - These are the worthless counselors that plot against the Lord (both literal and figurative). These are the idols that promise you can have success apart from God, joy apart from the Lord, blessing on your own path instead of his.
- God is showing that Assyria is just another human empire, despite its temporary strength, it can't give what only God can give (e.g., Louis XIV; France; Sun King; 72 years, longest reigning monarch of a sovereign country in history; Palace of Versailles; associated himself with Roman Sun God, Apollo; bad guy killing Huguenots; anal fistula surgery at age of 48). See through the facade.
  - Even the most powerful people are just people like you and I who, usually through some blessing outside of their control, have got to where they are (*contra divine right of kings, etc.*).
- Don't mistake your blessing for self-determination. Don't mistake your circumstance for your own power.
  - We can't hope in ourselves, our strength, our circumstances, our friends or anything else except God. Our only hope is in God.
  - Nahum is meant to expose your false hopes to drive you to trust in God alone.

### 3. God's Unimaginable Good News (1:12-15)

<sup>12</sup> Thus says the LORD, "Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. <sup>13</sup> And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart." <sup>14</sup> The LORD has given commandment about you: "No more shall your name be perpetuated; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile." <sup>15</sup> Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off.

**Comfort:** The name **Nahum** means comfort or comforter. But his message is only comfort for those who trust in God. How you see the message of Nahum will depend on your relationship with God (again, perspective). If you are his friend = comfort. If you are his enemy = despair.

- Evil doesn't triumph forever. God will defeat evil and restore his people. The goodness of creation that has been interrupted by sin will be renewed. In the end, the evil empire perishes and the faithful remnant prospers.

**Beautiful Feet:** This gospel promise in verse 15 is nearly identical to the promise of the Messiah in Isaiah 52. There is good news coming, a day of peace and salvation for God's people. When God himself will be present with them and will usher them into his holy city. God, through his word, would draw near to his people and that has been fulfilled in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

- This is the same message that is reiterated in Romans 10 when Paul calls those of us who have found refuge in God to take the message of the gospel to those who have not heard.
  - The invitation of the gospel is not only to *receive* the good news of God's salvation but to share it. **Receive the message and become a messenger.**

**Dreams Shattered:** The prophets "destroy our daydream" that all is at it should be or all hope is lost that it will change.

- For the wicked, they shouldn't get comfortable in their injustice because God is coming to judge their evil.
- For the faithful, don't despair in your suffering because God is coming to rescue.
  - We are disillusioned to think the way things are is the way things *should* be or that they can never change. We are not lost at sea. God has power and a plan.
  - In faith we can learn to see things from his perspective, not ours, a better and truer reality.

**Walk By Faith:** For those that have heard the message of Nahum and the promise of the gospel in all of Scripture, it is clear. God is coming to rescue those who have faith in him and judge those who reject him.

- In the midst of suffering, darkness, and evil in the world we are called to **trust the promises and plan of God**. We are to live according to his Word, not according to our perception.
  - We are called to walk by faith, to trust and obey what he says, not trust our limited perception and finite vantage point.
  - We trust his path, we trust his timing, and we trust his power to accomplish it all.