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# Devastation & Dedication

## God's Unfailing Promises to All People (Part 1)

### Nahum 1-3

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#### Introduction

**Genesis 3:14** The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel."

**Joshua 6:15 ff** On the seventh day they rose early, at the dawn of day, and marched around the city... 16 And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city..." 20 ...so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen and sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword... 24 And they burned the city with fire and everything in it.

**Nahum 1:2** 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...2:13 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... 3:7 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 her?

**Matthew 27:28** And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him... 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots... 39 And those who passed by derided him saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!..." 45 Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour... Jesus cried out saying... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" **Acts 2:23** this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God...

**Revelation 19:11ff** Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire... He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great...

## Family Secrets

Does your family have secrets? [EXAMPLE: Korea & mental health]. All five of these passages highlight attributes of God, his work, and his Kingdom that we often fail to think seriously about as Christians. In fact, if the truth be told, we often treat the war-like, destroying and conquering, wrathful, kingdom-establishing aspects of our glorious God like a family secret. We all know these certain things about God and his plan are true – historically, presently, and in the future – but we are loathe to say or do anything that would bring these things to light. In fact, we may even go so far as to avoid the passages, or books, in the Scripture, which discuss, with little reserve, these aspects of our God... just like a family secret. Yet Paul tells Timothy that the Scriptures are "...sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation... [and that] *All* Scripture is breathed out by God and [is] profitable (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

## What Version of Religion Do You Subscribe To?

When we fail to teach or consider the *whole* of Scripture, emphasizing those aspects of God's attributes and plan that we like, while deemphasizing (or altogether explaining away or subverting) those parts we do not like, we end up with multiple "versions" of religion, each varying in degree from biblical truth. Among the many distortions, I want to highlight three unbiblical considerations of the Word: the dismissive type, the selective type, and the preferential type.

### **Dismissive Consideration (Dismissing all of the Word)**

Some societies, more than others, have moved to a fully secularized version of religion where the distinctions between "T"ruth and "t"ruth are a fancy of the past, not something contemporary people concern themselves with. In other words, it all runs together, religion is just another sociological phenomena with no particular uniqueness. The Word is dismissed altogether. What might this look like? Recently, while on vacation in a country literally dotted with churches and crucifixes...

### **Selective Consideration (Selecting only parts of the Word)**

Here at home we may not be quite so dismissive, but we do tend to be fairly self-focused and selective in determining what versions of religion we will embrace. In other words, Christianity (or religion) becomes a means to self-serving ends such as self-improvement, values-clarification, or moral guidance. I pick and choose from the Scriptures the pieces I want. A book I'm reading on evangelism currently...

### **Preferential Consideration (Preferring certain parts of the Word to others)**

Then there are those that preferentially consider the Word, in other words, no part of the Bible is intentionally ignored, but certain parts are preferentially attended to and used to dominate all other Scriptures. This might be a view in which "grace" is spoken of, but not as a gift, rather as commodity which the believer must earn and then maintain through rigorous acts of self-denial and works righteousness. Our personal experience...

Failing to teach the whole of Scripture in any form, leads to errors in doctrine and errors in living. A brief application can be made here. As is true of any church, the Lord moves his people from place to place occasionally. It is not unlikely that some of you in the next year will find yourselves providentially relocated secondary to work, family, etc. When looking for a new church, a very simple but very important question you can ask the leadership is, “What is your plan for teaching your people the *whole* counsel of God?” No church is perfect in this pursuit, our own included. However, the church serious about teaching the Word of God will have a systematic approach to this endeavor.

### **Can That Really Be God?**

All of these common deviations from biblical truth represent both major and minor failures to appreciate the *whole* truth of the Bible. When we fail to consider *all* that God has told us, we will, eventually, begin drifting toward an unbiblical version of religion.

Which brings us to our consideration of Nahum and some of the very unpopular themes presented in the minor prophet. Themes that might cause any careful reader – or certainly the not so careful reader – of the Bible to question, “Can that really be God?” This is why we will spend our time tonight “situating” Nahum. That is, coming to understand about Nahum, and then moving on next week to expositing Nahum. [Let’s Pray]

Nahum majors on the themes of God’s holiness as it is demonstrated not in his mercy, but in his wrath; not in his saving, but in his destroying; not on his forgiveness of those who sin against him, but on his vengeance upon those who do not bow to him, and not on his loving-kindness but on his ravaging and righteous anger. Nahum is a book of devastation.

*But* there are minor themes in Nahum which fill out the whole picture of who God is. In Nahum, we see the electing love of a sovereign God (1:7, 12); we see the discipline of a faithful father (1:12); we see the protection of a strong king (1:7,13; 2:2), and we see the redeeming plan of a savior committed to his people’s joy (1:15, 2:2). Note that I said that these major and minor themes “*fill out the picture of who God is*” and not “*balance*” the picture of who God is. An important error we want to avoid in our study of Nahum is setting up some type of dichotomous thinking in our minds about God - a sort of Star Wars idea about the dark side and the light side of God and Nahum is mainly concerned with his dark side. This is not the case. Both God’s love and his justice flow from his holiness. Both are worthy of our praise and worship. God is not a deity who struggles with his own identity and vacillates between anger and kindness in some type of manic madness – rather He is the Creator God, King of the Universe, Sovereign over all and the One to whom all creation must answer. The Bible describes this reality as worthy of all glory<sup>1</sup> –hence, we must consider *all* the Bible.

If the church fails to consider all that the Bible says about God, to preach the entire counsel of God, even what Nahum says, we will fail to glorify all of who God is and, we will put ourselves at risk of developing a version of religion that is not accurate to what God has told us about himself... an error, whether intentional or not, that is of the gravest consequence – one that much of the church today suffers deeply under.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 75, 85 provide examples of God’s glory in his wrath upon his enemies.

Note that Nahum the prophet sets the example in verse 1 by doing no less. He tells us that he comes with an “oracle” or a “burden” for Judah that he received in a vision from God. What Nahum had received from the Lord, he then faithfully proclaimed to the people. As this was the role of the Old Testament prophet, so it is the role of the New Testament preacher.<sup>2</sup> Nahum did not edit, change, shy away from, soften, or distort any part of what he had received. He carried out his task, faithfully bearing the burden of God’s words as they were given to him.

## **Situating Nahum**

I think that any of us would admit that Nahum is obscure – not often read and not often preached. Because this is true, I want to take the rest of this evening to give a summary of the background information necessary to fully appreciate the message of Nahum. As we begin our consideration of Nahum, we’ll consider three “histories” if you will, that will prepare us to rightly understand the prophet: National History, Theological History, and Redemptive History. Then, over the next two weeks, we’ll consider from the prophecy of Nahum the dual themes of devastation and dedication as they are woven throughout this declaration of God’s word to his people about himself and his activity.

### **National History**

If you are at all like me, wandering into the minor prophets is a bit like trying to remember what happened last Tuesday. You know certain events took place – woke up, ate a couple of times, answered the phone, etc., but the details are really blurry, if remembered at all. The history of the nation of Israel, God’s people, can be the same way – you remember some important moments that tend to come up each time Israel’s history is discussed, but the details are really blurry. If we don’t bring the details into focus, the meaning of Nahum may be largely lost upon us – so remember with me...

That first...

- (2100 BC) God calls Abraham and tells him that he will make him into a mighty nation
- (100 years later) Abraham has a son named Isaac and Isaac has a son named Jacob. Jacob’s name is changed to Israel after a wrestling match (the name by which God’s people will come to be known).
- Jacob has twelve sons, for whom the twelve tribes of Israel are named.
- (90 years later) Joseph, one of the sons, is sold into slavery and is carted off to Egypt where he becomes a powerful leader in the pharaoh’s government.
- A famine forces Isaac and his remaining eleven sons to relocate to Egypt where Joseph can see to their needs.

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-4:2

- The family of Isaac greatly multiplies while in Egypt and they are enslaved by the Egyptians for 400 years.
- (450 years later) Then comes Moses, and as we are seeing in our Sunday AM study, the exodus, or the leaving of the people of Israel from Egypt, ensues. God promises the Israelites land. However Israel sins and is delayed another 40 years.
- (40 years later) Finally, under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites take the land (Canaan) and are established as a nation with a land.
- Under God's kingship, the nation of Israel is led by judges.
- (350 years later) Israel is tired of judges and they complain loudly to God for a king. Saul is the first king of Israel. He is the wrong man for the job and is replaced by David, a righteous king.
- (40 years later) Under David, the nation of Israel grows and becomes an established power in the region.
- (40 years later) Solomon, David's son, is the next king. Solomon builds the temple and continues to increase the nation's influence and wealth. But, Solomon turns away from God.
- (40 years later) Under the rulership of Solomon's sons, the nation of Israel is split. There is a northern kingdom, called Israel (10 tribes), and a southern kingdom, called Judah (2 tribes). They do not get along well and are often at war.
- (200 years later) The Assyrians, a powerful and neighboring nation, conquer the northern kingdom, Israel. The Assyrians are brutal to all they conquer and Israel is no exception... In fact, the 10 tribes destroyed by Assyria largely disappear from the pages of history.

And this brings us pretty close to the present time of Nahum – so we'll slow down a little now. All in all, around 1400 years have gone by since God called Abraham, about 320 years since the nation of Israel was led by King David, and 110 years since Assyria defeated and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. Habbakuk and Zephaniah are likely contemporaries of Nahum and most commentators believe that Josiah was king in Judah.<sup>3</sup> If this is true, then we know that Nahum prophesied to Judah during a time of national repentance and reform – Judah was turning back to God and the power and influence of the Assyrians was beginning to fade. Josiah called for the repair of the temple, during this effort, the “book of the law” quite possibly Deuteronomy, was rediscovered. Secondary to its reading, Josiah purged Judah of the practices and prophets of false religions. He also recommitted the people of Judah to following the Lord.

So here is the summary: Judah has fairly recently witnessed the disintegration of Israel as it was conquered by Assyria. Assyria not only deported the people of Israel, they resettled the land with their own people, customs, and religions – in some sense, this

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

was a systematic and planned ethnic cleansing. Israel suffered this because of their own wickedness – burning their own children as sacrifices to false Gods was just the beginning.<sup>4</sup> Judah was not much better at this time, yet God spared them for awhile. Judah lives under the shadow and influence of the great power of Assyria. But time passes, Assyria weakens, and the Lord, through Josiah, brings reform to Judah. Nahum shows up and his message is, in the simplest sense, a prediction and celebration of the fall of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria.

Why in the world would I take such a long time to explain all of this? Because as we will see in the next several minutes, a failure to understand the context in which God reveals himself will equal a failure to understand God himself. History matters. God does not give us a systematic theology, a bible dictionary, a piece of software with hundreds of commentaries, maps, lexicons, and translations (although all of these have a place and can be helpful). He gives us the Bible. And to understand all that he has revealed to us we must be ever-growing in our understanding of the Bible. Understanding God on his terms, not ours.

But we love shortcuts! We're Americans and efficiency is part of our credo. I think this is best demonstrated in our present day business/cultural phenomena of consulting [Example]. We approach the Bible the same way – I don't have to do the hard work of study myself. I'll get a consultant and let them figure it out for me! [Also seen in familiarity with the polemic but not the Scripture... ] This approach will forever keep us limited in our understanding of God and his plan. So, is it important that you, your children, actually know the history of the nation of Israel, as the Bible recounts it? Yes it is. Is it important that you be able to trace the thread of God's redemptive plan throughout all its phases in history? Yes it is. Why? Because this is how God gives himself to us. While he has graciously provided many helps – His Spirit, his under-shepherds, his people, etc., none of these can replace your understanding the Bible itself for yourself. Part of the reason Nahum is obscure is because of our lack of Bible knowledge.

## **Theological History**

God also reveals himself in history past, in the book of Nahum. In the next two weeks we will see God as holy, just, loving, fatherly, warrior-like, kind, sustaining, wrathful, protective, faithful, promise-keeping, and unstoppable. We see him as he is, as he reveals himself and we dare not add to, distort, or delete from, his self-revelation. This is the God of the Bible and in our consideration of him, our theology; we must take the greatest of pains to say all that he has said about himself. Nahum makes a meaningful contribution to this picture – one that has often been rejected, particularly in modern days.

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 17

## Redemptive History

Let's now consider briefly, the redemptive history of this book. When I say redemptive history in this context, I am simply meaning an understanding of Nahum in the context of God's unfolding plan. And what is this plan about? It is about redemption as a means of magnifying God's glory.

We can think of two specific aspects of redemption in relationship to the prophets – the first is God destroying his people's enemies or those who hold them in bondage. The second is God preparing his people for the kingdom, for fellowship with him. Both of these aspects is part of the process of God regenerating what had degenerated in the Garden. With regards to the first aspect, he is doing it through the history of a nation whose bondage is most clearly shadowed in their enslavement to Egypt. In Nahum, we see a similar shadow in the form of Assyria – and the redeeming God destroying his enemies, freeing his people from bondage.

Consider Nahum 3:3b “hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end – they stumble over the bodies...” And then 1:15 “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.” Make no mistake... So how is it that a loving God can be behind this?

If we fail to understand the book of Nahum in the redemptive historical context, the big picture we are led to the ugly, sinful, and potentially damning conclusion that God is not good. For in Nahum, we see that God will decisively destroy those who oppose him, those who oppress and enslave his people, and those who threaten the establishing of his kingdom. Interestingly, not only will he oppose them, but he will use them – even their evil intents, for his own purposes and glory. As with Egypt, God's activity against Assyria is merely a shadow preparing us for the substance. *A substance, that, when we become familiar with it in a biblical and personal way, we understand clearly that it takes no less than Warrior-God who is familiar with all the ways devastation and destruction to rescue us from our captor. Loved ones, we cannot afford a God who is not willing to go to the point of the most breath-stopping forms of murder for his glory and his people. We cannot afford a God who will not satisfy his holiness with vengeance and wrath in the most severe forms. Short of this type of God, we have no Christ on the cross and we have no salvation!* It is the perfect kiss of love and justice fully consummated in his holiness – but we cannot know these things if we do not understand his redemptive purposes as displayed in history.

In respects to this second aspect of redemption, God preparing his people for his kingdom, for fellowship with him, the prophets (although not Nahum), begin to make painfully clear that God's chosen people are woefully incapable of true repentance, of obedience, they cannot keep their part of the covenant. The whole of God's chosen people have miserably failed. Nahum prophecies the fall of Nineveh, in which God's people can celebrate and rejoice. But no sooner are they done celebrating than those who God used to obliterate the Assyrians, the Babylonians, Medes, and Chaldeans, he sets upon Judah – and with a single and fatal stroke, all the glory of Israel

under David and Solomon is gone. God has judged his people for their disobedience, just as he warned in Deuteronomy.<sup>5</sup> God always keeps his promises to all people.

In respects to such events, Goldsworthy says this, "...we see the prophetic judgment as the clearest indicator of the fact that full salvation has not yet come... it becomes ever clearer that this problem cannot be dealt with by those things that God has done for Israel in her history... These things show the nature of [our] plight in bondage to sin and death, the structure of salvation and the kingdom of God. But the shadow must fade so that the full light of the reality may be revealed in its place."<sup>6</sup>

While there is much more that can be said about the minor prophets and redemptive history, we'll leave our observations here for this evening.

## Conclusion

I had the opportunity to attend the Creation Museum this past Friday and in the exhibit about the famous Scopes-Monkey trial there was a description of a contemporary of Billy Graham, a fellow evangelist by the name of Charles Templeton, he famously abandoned the faith writing a book in 1996 entitled *Farewell to God*.<sup>7</sup> One of Templeton's major difficulties with the idea of the biblical god was that nature was "red in tooth and claw" and how could a "good" god be behind that? Answers in Genesis draws the conclusion from historical data that Templeton's abandonment stemmed in part from not being taught a biblical view of creation.

It is not difficult to imagine that Templeton may have also asked, "How could God be behind the book of Nahum?" If indeed Templeton had not been taught the full counsel of the word of God, leading him to an understanding of the full nature and plan of God, Nahum would simply be another plank in his argument against God. Whatever the case may have been, Templeton, because he had not been accurately taught, and because he did not believe the full counsel of God, became an evangelist for Satan.

How important is it that we accurately teach the whole counsel of the Word of God? Vitally important. The best argument for preaching Nahum is simply this: It is in the Bible. We must come to understand and believe all that God has revealed to us in order that we might glorify him fully and in order that we might avoid error. Yes God is a loving and kind God, but he is also a wrathful and decisively destructive God as is best evidenced in his assault on sin and death on the cross. We must learn to worship Him for all that he is.

Let's pray.

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 5-6, esp. 6:10-15

<sup>6</sup> Goldsworthy, G. *According to Plan* (pp. 185-186).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v22/i3/unbelief.asp>