
Devastation & Dedication

God's Unfailing Promises to All People (Part 2)

Nahum 1-3

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Introduction

I have a niece that was raped several years ago. I have a brother who openly professes that he is not a Christian. I have a niece who is afflicted with cerebral palsy. I have a brother who has all but dissociated himself from my family for religious reasons. I have a niece who has a serious developmental disorder that is yet to be diagnosed. I have a family that was nearly destroyed by false teaching in the recent past. Beth and I cannot seem to get pregnant. I live in a country that kills its unborn. In a world where millions starve. In a global reality that is characterized by war and brutality. In an domestic economy that is plagued by lies, scandals, and I've had my identity stolen more time than I care to count. I receive emails with the most vulgar temptations. My parents' bodies are aging and I know they will die all too soon. And then I live with myself. I am arrogant. I am lustful. I am self-centered and lazy. I care little for the lost. I hunger after this material world with intentionality. I am ever so proud. I am hypocritical. I am legalistic when it serves me well. I regularly violate traffic laws. I complain about my life. I am over-concerned about appearances. I manipulate people and situations for my own good... and the list could go on infinitely.

After last Sunday's sermon someone approached me shortly afterward and said, "I think about wrath a lot." Although we did not have time to unpack everything meant by that, in part, I suspect that the simple message was that they longed for the day when we will be free of the influence of all that is opposed to God – Satan, the sin of the world, and the sin within me. The older (and more mature) that I become, the more I understand that sentiment. Who will free us from this bondage? Dwelling on that yearning of the soul, can bring us a deep sadness while simultaneously pointing us to a great Savior who will free all creation from bondage. And as we said last week, this Savior must be a warrior, able to conquer and destroy our captors – and it is on that note we will dwell this evening. [Let's Pray]

God's Unfailing Promises to All People

Note the subtitle of this sermon series is God's Unfailing Promises to *All* People – and tonight we will be dealing with the promises of God, however, it will not be the promises we *usually* talk about. Usually we find ourselves discussing the promises that God makes to *His* people. But there are also promises to those who are not his people. Consider Christ's words to those who had rejected him and failed to repent:

Matthew 11:21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

This God that we praise and worship here at Clearcreek has made promises to *all* people. He is not a local or native deity – he reigns supremely over *all* the Earth and over *all* people. Tonight we consider God’s promises, in the form of a prophecy, to the city of Nineveh and the nation of Assyria. We will see up close what God does to those who defy him, threaten his people, and oppose his kingdom. And be warned, this is not God the Diplomat – coming to make friends. This is God the Warrior-King, coming to make right... to loose on his enemies his righteous wrath which will give no quarter until all are destroyed.

Nineveh...

To set the scene, we want to take just a few moments to consider several details about Nineveh, the capital of the nation of Assyria. We’ll then briefly consider several literary aspects of Nahum and wrap up by moving through five judgment oracles pronounced by Nahum. Recall from last week that we are in a time period about 100 years following Assyria’s successful conquering of Israel, the northern kingdom. Since this time Judah, the southern kingdom, has lived in Assyria’s shadow – and the shadow has not been without substance. Assyria’s influence is real. Not only has Assyria attacked Judah, but they have also extorted significant payments from Judah, which resulted in the demeaning sacking of the Temple for silver and gold. Nahum is now on the scene in Judah offering this prophecy about the nearing downfall of Assyria.

Was a Mighty City...

But Nineveh was a mighty city! Located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, in what is today modern Iraq, near the city of Mosul, Nineveh has been described by some as an impregnable fortress. The city wall was eight miles in circumference and it could accommodate a population of 300,000 people.¹ It is said that the wall itself was wide enough to accommodate the width of three chariots, that is about 50 feet wide, and was between 90 and 100 feet high. [point out thickness and height of wall in auditorium] The walls themselves had a name, “the wall whose glory overthrows the enemy.” The city palaces were like none other – one housed a library of over 22,000 stone tablets, and was called, “The Palace with No Rival.” The city architects had devised a system of moats and canals which was continuously refreshed by one of the tributaries of the nearby Tigris. On three sides Nineveh was protected by smaller forts built in the suburbs, while the fourth side was protected by the river. It would be easy to go on – what I want you to see, is that Nineveh was awesome – its sheer size overwhelming. It all but screamed, “Power!” “Might!” “Ability!” “Defiance!”

Who had a History With God’s People...

Assyria, Israel, and Judah were indeed familiar with each other. There is the well-known episode of Jonah and then the overthrow and deportation of Israel. On the map we saw earlier, the pink represented all the places the peoples of the northern kingdom had been deported to. I also mentioned that Assyria had in the past attacked Judah. It is here that

¹ estimate based on Jonah 4:11

we probably most clearly come to understand the spirit characterizing Assyria at this time. Do you remember Hezekiah...? No, it is not the name of an Old Testament book (that's Haggai and Habakkuk), but rather the name of a King of Judah during the time that Israel was conquered by Assyria. About 10 years after Israel falls, Sennacherib sends his commander, the Rabshakeh, with the Assyrian army to Jerusalem... The army is standing just outside the city in full view of the Israelite soldiers sitting on the walls of the city...

And had Become Full of Itself.

Let's pick up the story in 2 Kings – the Rabshakeh is speaking directly to Eliakim, Hezekiah's representative and Eliakim has just asked the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramic so that the people of Jerusalem will not understand the conversation. The Rabshakeh refuses and here is what he says, even louder, – for all to hear:

2 Kings 18 27But the Rabshakeh said to them, "Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine?" 28Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah: "Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! 29Thus says the king: 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand. 30Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD by saying, The LORD will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' 31Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria: 'Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, 32until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live, and not die. And do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, The LORD will deliver us. 33 Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? 34 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? 35Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?'

I think little needs to be offered in the way of interpretation here – this was the spirit of Assyria. Note with me just one similarity in passing here: Hear a sampling of the Rabshakeh's words again: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you...by saying The LORD will surely deliver us... [instead] come out to me...that you may live and not die. Now hear these words: "Did God actually say... But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die... your eyes will be opened and you will be like God..."(Genesis 3). Do you hear the echo? In some sense, in Assyria, we see the same enemy coming against God's people with the same tricks and the same arrogant pride.

Nahum is High Quality Literature...

Let's move now on to the book of Nahum itself. Nahum is praised by commentators as being, if nothing else, a master literary work. Because this is true, we will help ourselves greatly if we come to understand just a few of its literary features.

Built Around a Clear Structure...

The first thing to note is that there is a structure built into the book of Nahum and it is highlighted by many features – we want to consider just one that will help us as we consider the whole of the book and that is the layout. It begins and ends with an inclusio, that is the inclusion of similar material at the beginning and the end of the work. Here it is evil introduced and evil done away with. In striking form we have the simple but powerful message orienting this book: Those who oppose the Lord will surely die. In between then we have four judgments. The key to picking these out is that they all end with a word from the Lord signaled by “Behold.” 1:15, 2:13, 3:5, and 3:13. We'll consider each of these judgment sections in just a moment and we'll use this layout to guide our consideration of Nahum.

Using Various Literary Devices.

The second thing we can note is that Nahum uses several literary devices that if we understand going into the book will make our understanding much easier. To give you a parallel, have you ever received a piece of mail that comes in one of those unidentified white envelopes. The return address has no name or title, the address window is suspicious because something about it says mass mailing, the postage mark offers little information... but you decide to open it anyway. And because the sender has done such a masterful job of disguising the intent, you actually have to read the letter. Is it an inquiry? A sales pitch? A political position? A class-action lawsuit? If you just knew, you would be able to put this into context right away and decide what to do with it.

In Nahum, if we realize that we have hymns, dirges, woes, judgments, and taunts, everything becomes a little clearer. The first eleven verses are a hymn, glorifying God for who he is. The four sections we just noted are judgments which contain woes and taunts. The last six verses of the book, 3:14-19, are a dirge, devised for the specific occasion of Nineveh's destruction. With these things in place, let's go to the text.

Nahum Considered

Tonight we will be focusing mainly on Devastation, that is, God's wrath against evil. We'll end on the glorious note of Dedication next week. As we examine devastation, keep the bigger picture that we discussed last week in mind. What we have, ultimately, in Nahum, is God responding to those who oppose him, enslave his people, and seek to slow the advance of his kingdom.

Opening Hymn (1:2-11): God, The Enemies' Enemy

[Read] These opening verses are considered the key to understanding Nahum. They speak to us of God and *who* he is. This hymn answers the question, “Do you know who

you are dealing with?” Verse 2 quickly orients us to the predominating characteristic of God in this book – see it? Here is how the original Hebrew words are ordered: A jealous God and an avenger is the Lord, an avenger is the Lord and owner of wrath, an avenger is the Lord against his enemies, and a keeper of anger is he against his foes. Three times, in one form or another we have the word “avenger.”

And who is it that can make good on such a title? Who can live up to it? If you are going to wear the title “Heavyweight Champion of the World” you better pack the punch to back it up! Well consider the Champion’s credentials in nature: Even the mountains quake before God! Our avenger has flooded the Earth, set up nations and brought them down, defeated sin, and will utterly destroy Satan! Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? The answer is no one.

Between verses 9 and 11 we see that the focus of the hymn begins to narrow. In verse 9 God asks a direct question. Then in verse 11 there is a very specific indictment. There is no question that this “worthless counselor” came from Assyria, but *who* it is, is somewhat open. Many commentators believe this is the Rabshakeh that we read about in 2 Kings, and if this is not the person, he can certainly be thought of as being representative of a worthless counselor who came from Assyria and plotted evil against the Lord. And although this person is dangerous (e.g. thorns, drunkard), God will completely finish them.

Judgment Oracle 1 (1:12-15) God, Your Champion

This brings us to the first judgment oracle in verses 12-15 [Read]. This passage is linked to the previous hymn by the term “worthless.” You’ll see it in both verse 11 and again in verse 15. The Hebrew word used here is “*Belial*” and is a compound formed by combining the words “nothingness” and “worthlessness,” you might say, an “unworthy nothing.” Paul uses the same word to describe Satan in 2 Corinthians 6:15. It is a very strong term that I believe is indicative of the degree of emotion and revulsion that God has for his enemies.

This passage also speaks directly to Judah. God reassures his people that those that are their enemies will be dealt with completely and finally, that is, they will be “cut down” and their very name will become like yesterday’s news, old and forgotten, and God himself is preparing their grave. This is the language of war – the threats are real – and Assyria is now on the chopping block. But notice that God, in his sovereignty, will use Assyria for whatever purposes he deems fit. At the end of verse 12, Assyria is accomplishing his glory by afflicting Israel and Judah, but now they will be used for his glory in their destruction. You can see this same pattern in God’s dealing with Egypt. We must humble ourselves in realizing that we as clay serve the Potter. In God’s electing purposes he will use his creation as he sees fit for his glory. Nahum does not launch a long defense of God here – it is implied in the opening hymn: God is God. And he need not be defended in this.

Although we will spend more time in verse 15 next week, we must at least gaze at its beauty as we pass by. Does this passage look familiar? It should, it can also be found in Romans 10. There it is not applied to Assyria, but to an even more dangerous enemy – one that can take not only Assyria to hell, but the whole world! Here the *good news* is the demise of Assyria. God’s people are to rejoice in the hearing of it, they are to honor God

and celebrate. But what is the good news in Romans 10? I leave that to your own investigation – drink deeply of the joys of discovering God’s plans.

Judgment Oracle 2 (2:1-13) God, the Shatterer

In chapter 2 the predominant picture here is the attack of the city of Nineveh – it is almost as if Nahum is standing on one of Nineveh’s mighty walls and commenting. We ourselves will simply look on as Nahum describes the seen. [Read vv. 1-2]. The ESV uses the word “scatterer” here, a better word may actually be “shatterer.” A declaration to which the following sentence seems to be spoken in bitter irony – for what good will the preparations of Nineveh do? None. [Read vv. 3-4] In verse 3 we are given a hint to the invaders, for the Babylonian coalitions are described as clothed in scarlet elsewhere in Scripture.² Here we see the Babylonian coalition breaking through Nineveh’s first line of defenses, the suburbs and the forts contained within. Can you hear the rising tension in the words here? The “shatterer” has arrived. In verse 5 Nahum shifts his attention to the city itself [Read vv. 5-10] The Assyrian soldiers fall over themselves as they go to defend the city walls – but! the city walls have been breached at the riverside! Nineveh is stripped, exposed, carried off, and her inhabitants cry out in distress! Hundreds of years of power and rule begin to melt away in matter of moments. Those who were so mighty in their conquering now will not take orders to defend even their own homes. Verse 10 magnifies the raw fear that will overtake the Ninevehites. The city is open to plundering. Those who had destroyed, are destroyed. Those who had plundered, are plundered. Those who intimidated, are intimidated. There is an *utter reversal* when the shatterer arrives.

[Read vv. 11-12] And now an open taunt to the nation of Assyria – What happened? Where is all your might and majesty now? Those questions are answered in our next “Behold” statement in v.13. [Read v. 13] “Behold, I am against you...” This is the final explanation for the destruction of all evil for all time. None can withstand the opposition of God (1:6).

Judgment Oracle 3 (3:1-7) God, the Exposer

Chapter 3 begins a statement of woe for the Ninevehites, a pronouncement of their impending doom. [Read vv. 1-7]. And as typical with woes, verses 1-4 are a description of Assyria and its evils against other nations – continually devouring, through lies, false treaties, false promises (like those promised to the people of Judah by the Rabshakeh), brutality, exportation, resettlement... Need a modern day picture of an Assyria-like world? In my mind there are many parallels to Rwanda in the early 90’s. And those of you familiar with those events will be sobered by the extent of Assyria’s evils.

Assyria is the whore – luring nations with ripe, colorful, succulent fruit that held promise of things much greater. And when her prey was within reach she pounced, strangling, tearing, and destroying! But the woe turns in verses 5-7 to what God will do. Little did Assyria know that she would be utterly wasted by the Lion of Judah. Little did sin know

² Ezekial 23:6

that its deathly sting would be removed by a Lamb. And little does Satan know that he will be defeated by a mighty warrior on a white horse with a sword protruding from his mouth! The mighty Lord will make Nineveh the object of a derision so great, that all of the world will despise, reject, and hold her in contempt. No one will rush to her. It will be like spitting on New Orleans after the hurricane, scoffing at Sri Lanka after the Tsunami or leaving Europe to rot in poverty after World War II, no Marshall plan. All of God's enemies will, in the end, be cut off, no longer heard of, they will not rise up a second time (1:9).

Judgment Oracle 4 (3:8-13) God, the disrespecter of persons

Verses 8-13 are clearly a taunt, almost a sneer, against Assyria. [Read 8-10]. God questions Nineveh – Is she any greater than Thebes? And as I see it there is almost an intentional redirecting of attention, a rhetorical snare, if you will. Because the fact is, Assyria was greater than Thebes! Assyria had conquered the great city of Thebes, which in many respects was every bit as successful and powerful as Assyria. So what is the point of making this comparison? Verse 10 draws us closer to the answer. Nahum directs the attention to what was done to Thebes and undoubtedly the Assyrians could recount their terrible devastation of Thebes... However, this is simply the set-up for verse 11. [Read 11-13] The tables will now turn, “You also will be drunken...” Remember Thebes, Assyria? Prepare to drink the same cup of wrath.

Here is how one commentator puts it, “Nahum is using in this oracle the familiar Old Testament figure of God’s cup of wrath from which all – Israel and foreign nations alike – are forced to drink when they defy God’s lordship... The results of that cup are staggering, vomit, stupefaction, and helplessness.”³ Psalm 75:38 says, “For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs. And Revelation 16:19 as the seventh bowl of wrath is revealed, “The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.” And then to the Garden of Gethsemane where we find an unlikely one in possession of the same cup, Mark 14:36 says, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will.”

Think with me about this cup of wrath. Nahum has already stated in 1:3, God will by no means clear the guilty. The cup is intended for the guilty. I am the guilty. So how am I saved from being forced to drink this cup of wrath? Beloved, Christ has taken this cup of the fury of God’s wrath, given to Assyria and meant for all who oppose God, and drank it down to the dregs for us! Does not your heart expand in its ability to appreciate the awfulness of what happened on the cross? (expand if time)

Do you realize what cup we hold? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the

³ Achtemeier (1986). *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Nahum to Malachi.*

cup, after supper, saying, “This *cup* is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” This is the miracle of substitution summed up in the exchanging of cups. Oh may the black horror of Assyria and the sheer glory of the gospel transform us, and transform our times of communion...

Verses 12 and 13 simply demonstrate how Nineveh will fall and what the state of its majestic military will be. Nahum could have just as well said that Nineveh’s mighty men will wet their pants when they see what God has planned for them.

Judgment Oracle 5 (3:14-19) God, the almighty

We must hurry to the end, so let’s read together verses 14-19. Here we see irony employed again. Nineveh can prepare itself for the coming day, but it will be of no avail. No matter how much it has by earthly measures it will melt away in the heat of God’s anger (1:6, 2:6). Verses 18-19, are the final dirge, prepared for Nineveh’s funeral. Fatal wounds and death is now what characterizes the once great city of Nineveh.

So what can we learn from this consideration of Nahum?

Observations & Applications

Warnings. You can have money, sophistication, power, ability, and intelligence, but none of these will withstand the Lord’s opposition. All of these things, when God comes, will “fly away.” (e.g. like birds...) And there you will be alone, naked, and cold before the almighty – all you will have is your sin and it will weigh upon you as a millstone. Assyria did not escape and neither will you. We dare not presume upon God’s kindness as a defense for our sin and wickedness. We just barely mentioned the event earlier, but do you remember Jonah? Keep in mind that there was a time that Nineveh had repented before God and averted his wrath, but somewhere along the way hearts wandered and turned from him. God did not spare his wrath a second time. Let us soberly examine our own hearts – are we enemies of God?

Encouragement. Remember we started out by me reading you a long list of evils. Dear ones, we have sat in the bleachers, so to say, this evening as we observed the devastating power of the almighty. This is the same power that will one day eradicate all sources of evil and all will be at it was made to be – in perfect communion with God. We will no longer toil in our labor, strive with our neighbor, or know pain and suffering from physical processes. All will be well. Would you like to see evidence that this will really one day be so? Well Google can help. Here is the site of ancient Nineveh today – it is nothing but an archaeological dig. Your sin, the sin of others, the imperfections of creation, and Satan himself will one day be simply a memory.

All who hear the news about [them] will clap their hands. For upon whom has not come [their] unceasing evil (Nahum 3:19).