
Devastation & Dedication

God's Unfailing Promises to All People (Part 3)

Nahum 1-3

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Introduction

Do you ever stand in the kitchen wondering when this will all end? Perhaps your husband has been out of town for the 4th day straight, your children are out of control, and it is your turn to do a fishes-and-loaves type miracle in order to feed the 35 people in your flock... which starts in three hours. Or maybe you are sitting in your cubicle – you are so tired that you could easily put your head down and be in deep REM sleep in a matter of minutes. The deadline has so stressed you out that you feel “on edge” almost 24/7. And you know factually that your colleagues are hoping you crack under the pressure, because they never liked you in the first place. You are completely consumed with your work, barely in touch with the world around you... Wondering, when will this end? Or maybe it is one of those days when you hate and loathe and despise yourself. You’ve failed again. The sin that you swore off last month, and the month before, and the month before, you’ve just willfully committed again. You are utterly repulsed by yourself... and you look up to God, about ready to totally lose it, and ask, when will this end?! Or maybe your in a foxhole, in a trench, kicking down a door, running through a dusty alley in another country with your finger an inch away from a trigger wondering why this world is so messed up; wondering if you’ll be normal when you get back to your home and family; wondering when the next time is you’ll get more than 4 hours of sleep; wondering if you’ll get shot...

Pour a little life into a bowl, add a sufficient measure of time, place the bowl into an oven set at 500 degrees... and then wait. Into most of our lives, there have come times when we wish we could lie down and not wake up. These times are accentuated by lingering questions such as, Where is God? or When will God...? or Why did God? You look around yourself and long, with the deepest of yearnings, to be home... Away from all the hardship, tragedy, and travesty that a sin-saturated world produces. You instinctively grab your Bible... but where do you turn? Would you ever think of turning to Nahum?

During the past two weeks we have considered the historical, redemptive historical, and literary elements related to the book of Nahum and last week we considered specifically the devastation that God brings upon all sources of evil, noting from the inclusio that all those who oppose God will eventually be defeated and damned. This week we are shifting our focus to considering the dedication of God to his people. And I want to do this in a way that allows us to make specific applications to our day to day life.

In other words, I don't want you to forget Nahum as soon as this series is over. It is a book that is worth our attention. Certainly it is a book that heralds God's wrathful vengeance on all who rebel against him, but it is also a book that extends hope to all believers by demonstrating to them God's unwavering dedication to them. You have a God who is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to satisfy his holiness and to gratify his love. [Let's Pray].

Last Words on Devastation

I suppose we could consider our first few observations this evening an extension of our consideration of God's devastating action against Assyria – but I bring us back to this theme because I believe there are many important things here that we must apply to ourselves, beyond the main encouragement that God will destroy all persons and powers that oppose him. We'll consider just two: God is not slow in keeping his promises and applying the prophecy about Assyria as a warning to ourselves.

He is not Slow in Keeping His Promises (1:3)

Let's begin with Nahum 1:3, The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. Nahum here is repeating a truth which resonates throughout Scripture. In Exodus 34 on the occasion of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments the *second time*, we have this truth introduced to the nation of Israel. Israel has sinned grievously against God by erecting the golden calf when Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments the first time. Moses successfully intercedes on behalf of the people, and God says this about himself to Moses: vv. 6-7b, 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, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."

It is likely that the people of Judah, when hearing the words of the prophet Nahum recalled this Scripture – and thanked their Lord that while he is not slow in keeping his promises, he is slow to anger and to deal out wrath. Many times I believe we wish that God would act faster. When we wish this, we should consider that what we perceive as a slow pace may simply be God demonstrating his mercy, graciousness, patience, abounding love, steadfast faithfulness, and forgiving of sin – all things he delights in showing us and all reasons for us to glorify him.

We should also consider that some characteristics of God's character are impossible for us to understand apart from the passage of time. What if after the very first time your child was out past curfew you changed the locks and said, "Tough luck buddy, your outta here!" And he says, "But I thought you were patient, merciful, gracious, and forgiving." It would certainly be hard for your child to understand your character given these circumstances. So we must be careful that our discontent with God does not become a subtle rejection of those things we should praise him for. When impatience creeps in, ask yourself, "Is God demonstrating the qualities of Exodus 34:6-7 here? And am I rejecting the goodness of his self-revelation for selfish and short-sighted desires?" (comment: teens)

Further, we should also consider the words of Peter in 2 Peter 3:8-9 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. 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. These words are placed right in the middle of the context of the coming judgment and destruction. And just as Nahum has taught us, this judgment WILL come and it WILL be swift and furious... Nahum 2:8 Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. We'll return to this thought in a little bit.

Applying the Warning to Ourselves (1:3)

We would be foolish if we did not, after a consideration of the book of Nahum, try and see if Assyria's "shoe fits" so to say, that is, see if we sit in the place of the warned. Hear Calvin's prayer after the first five verses of Nahum:

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou settest before us here as in a mirror how dreadful thy wrath is, we may be humbled before thee, and of our ourselves cast ourselves down, that we may not be laid prostrate by thy awful power, - O grant, that we may by this instruction be really prepared for repentance, and so suppliantly deprecate [humbly avoid] that punishment which we daily deserve through our transgressions, that in the meantime we may be also transformed into the image of thy Son, and put off all our depraved lusts, and be cleansed from our vices, until we shall at length appear in confidence before thee, and be gathered among thy children, that we may enjoy the eternal inheritance of thy heavenly kingdom, which has been obtained for us by the blood of thy Son. Amen.

Different People

We might say that although God is dedicated to devastation, for those that are his enemies, he is also dedicated to deliverance for those who are his own. But we should be clear that there are only two groups: those that are his, and those that are not. In Nahum these groups are called on the one side: the guilty, adversaries, evil, and enemies. On the other side: those he knows, Judah, Jacob, and Israel. There is no in between, no third group, no "uncertain" designation. The Bible is always very clear in maintaining this dichotomous approach to people and we must not blur it as it concerns ourselves, our children, or those we seek to share the gospel with. The fatal nature of being an enemy of God is far too serious to soften the picture for fear of offending people or craving their unhindered admiration and approval.

Different Promises

In the book of Nahum, Judah would have done well to observe the wrath visited upon Assyria for her sins – for as God had already demonstrated with Israel, and as he states clearly in 1:3b, he will "by no means clear the guilty." Nevertheless, he is not a hasty God, sending down lightning bolts capriciously – 1:3a tells us that he is "slow to anger and great in power." It had been over 100 years since Assyria conquered Israel and hundreds of years previous to that Assyria had made a reputation for itself as cruel and unrelenting. God had sent Jonah to Assyria for their rescue. But in the end, they rejected God. And in the end, the God who is slow to anger, not for a lack of power (1:3a), gives the guilty their due. In one sense, this is a promise as sure as God's promise to save his own. Those who disobey will be cursed, and those who obey will be blessed.

Difficult Discussions

How does this apply in everyday life? Here is one example from personal experience as Pastor for Youth. Last year I had a long discussion with a young person about their status as a child of God versus an enemy of God. I was not saying what the youth wanted to hear – in fact, I put our relationship on the line. I was clearly telling them that despite their profession of faith, I did not see evidences of God's work in their life. In fact, I saw what appeared to be something more like open rebellion toward

God. Clearly, I could not know the individual's heart, but I could respond to the outward manifestations that warranted a warning. Hence Paul's warning in Galatians:

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

I am afraid that in our obsession with needing to be liked, or the craving of interpersonal peace at any cost, or the self-deceit that we must know all there is to know about the Bible before we can speak into anyone's life, we fail to warn each other. With unbelievers we often say to ourselves, "Well who am I to tell them what they need to do?" In fact, warnings seem to have fallen completely out of style, yet the Scripture gives many of them.

If we are to be God's children, we must be those who are ready to give and receive warnings. And given our present day culture, this comes to us with great risk. Relationships can be lost over warnings. Nevertheless, better to warn one away from eternal consequences than to secure a fleeting temporal peace. Be clear, however, and this is important! It is the message of the warning, not the messenger, that should drive people away (if they are unwilling to heed the warning). To those in the body we are to "speak the truth in love"¹ and to those outside the body our speech is to "always be gracious, seasoned with salt."²

If you have come to be known as caustic, arrogant, attacking, and argumentative you should take a hard look at yourself. Note that Christian euphemisms for these descriptions may sound like, "She is very forward" or "He is a very direct person." Conversely, if in your fear of man you've never once spoken the truth in a situation that required risk, never warned anyone other than your children, you too should take a hard look at yourself. The Christian euphemism for this type of person is, "normal" or "average."

Dedication: God's Unfailing Promises to *His* People

Now we turn to those things by which God demonstrates his promises to *his* people in the book of Nahum. As we have mentioned in the weeks past, Nahum is a book whose primary concern is the enemies of God. However, we should be quick to appreciate that Nahum was most likely given to Judah – not Assyria, as in the book of Jonah. So there is something here that God intends for his people to appreciate Warnings, undoubtedly, but also encouragements, right doctrine, right living, well-placed hope, and certain comfort.

Dedication as Evidence by His Destroying (1:12-14)

Let's begin by considering again Nahum 1:12-14: Thus says the LORD, "Though they [Assyria] are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you [Judah], I will afflict you [Judah] no more. And now I will break his [Assyria] yoke from off you

¹ Ephesians 4:15

² Colossians 4:6

and will burst your bonds apart." The LORD has given commandment about you [Assyria]: "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." [additions mine]

God shows his steadfast love and faithfulness to his people by destroying his enemies. We will consider in just a moment the "delivering" aspect of his destructive activity that is all tied up with this, but for now, we simply reflect on his destruction. This theme predominates in Nahum: To God's enemies, "I will utterly defeat you." To God's people, "I will utterly defeat your enemies." Note that God's judgment is devastating (he will cut them down), permanent (they will pass away and no more will their name be perpetuated), and decisive (there is no half-way action – God himself will make their grave, for they are vile, when God is done, his enemies WILL BE dead).

So let's consider a related passage, Romans 12:19-21: Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. There is much that can be said here, probably a whole sermon, but let me try to summarize. As individuals, we must never assume the role of avenger or repay evil for evil.³ In contrast, we must seek to do good to our enemies – that is, show them love by doing what is the best biblical good unto them, hoping that they will repent and be redeemed.

Simultaneously, neither Paul or Nahum call us to neuter God, that is, make him impotent. Both in Nahum and in Romans, God IS an avenger and he will dispense wrath in the harshest forms, decisively conquering our enemies. And we are called to rejoice in this very thing! See Nahum 1:15, Romans 7:24-25; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. There are no apologies for this, only that we leave this work wholly to God, the righteous judge – who judges perfectly and dispenses punishment and wrath perfectly. Our tendency is to repay evil with evil. Only God can dole out *holy* wrath. Paul exemplifies this well when writing to Timothy, he says, (2 Timothy 4:14) "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." Our repayment for evil is to be gospel good, hence, v.21 of Romans 12, Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Leave the wrath-making (which is a form of goodness) to our perfect and holy God who perfectly judges and perfectly executes (comment: devastating, permanent, and decisive in contrast to human wars...).

Here is the summary and application of this point: Has your reputation been falsely slandered at work? Were you cheated by a seller on Ebay? Were you lied to and misled by someone selling real estate? Were you mugged? Have you been raped or sexually abused? Have your children destroyed your life with intentionality and avarice? Is there a bully who uses their size and weight to shove you around? Think of all the seriously harmful and deeply egregious acts that take place everyday – not only at the individual level, but all the way up to the global level: People in Darfur are hacked to death, people in Central

³ Romans 12:17

America live in mortal fear of drug cartels, suicide bombers all over the world take thousands of innocent lives... All this is vile!

Beloved, God will one day unleash a wrath so spectacular upon all these evils and the persons who propagate them that the destruction of Nineveh will fade in comparison. Be patient, it will come. Their due will come, when they least expect it. Let the fires of your *righteous* indignation be satisfied with the heavy and slow burning logs of the knowledge of a perfect wrath to come. Do not stoke your fire with the puny kindling and scrub of human vengeance which creates a putrid and dirty smoke bringing shame instead of glory – but rather, wait, "...as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur..."⁴

In the meantime, do gospel good to every one of those who inflict evil upon you, that they might hear the truth, repent, and be redeemed – lest they find themselves on the wrong side of God's wrath when it comes. Rescue the lost with the gospel, not with vengeance. (comment: contrast with Hollywood)

Dedication as Evidenced by His Delivering (1:13, 15, 2:2)

That is God's dedication to us as evidenced by his destruction, but, we can also see it in his deliverance. Consider with me the following verses in Nahum: 1:13 And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart; 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; 2:2 For the Lord is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel.

While God will ultimately deliver us from all enemies, the one we are most familiar with, perhaps on a moment by moment basis, is sin. What we see in Nahum applies no less to sin than it does to death, Satan, the wicked, and all evil. God will utterly destroy all enemies of his kingdom. Nahum merely demonstrates that he has both the plan and the power to do it. I'm curious, did you take a look at the other contexts of Nahum 1:15? Specifically, did you travel over to Romans 10? Did you take time to gaze into the glories of his Word this week? Come with me to Romans 10.

Let's begin in verse 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!*" [emphases mine].

⁴ Revelation 21:8

In Nahum the good news is that Judah will be saved from the oppression of Assyria. In Romans the good news is that *all* people can be saved from the oppression and penalty of sin. God is the warrior-savior in Nahum and God is the warrior-savior in Romans. Nahum is the shadow, the preview, the redemptive story that prepares the way, Romans presents us with the substance, the reality. What is the good news? It is that we can be saved! Here the word:

Romans 6:6 ff We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin...death no longer has dominion over him...For sin will no longer have dominion over you...

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

1 Corinthians 15:54b ff Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nahum is an *echo* back in time from Golgotha, from the empty tomb, and from a of group dumbfounded disciples on the mountain hearing the promises of an ascending Savior! Christ, crucified, resurrected, and ascended, is the sounding voice, the source of the echo – calling out, "I will break his yoke from off of you and will burst your bonds apart...Behold, upon the mountain, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows..." (Nahum 1:13, 15). God will carry out his redeeming plan – he will have victory over all enemies.

Loved ones, your sin and its penalty have been conquered. Although there is an already and not yet aspect to this reality, the conquering of Nineveh is meant to encourage us that there will come a day when you will be free from not only the penalty and the power of sin, but also the presence of sin... And oh how we long for that day! Where we will say with Nahum, (3:19b) "All who hear the news about you [sin and death] clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?" and with John (Revelation 21:2-4) And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Why no death in the new heaven and the new Earth? Because there will be no sin! When you are discouraged by your sin, weighed down heavily by your wrongdoing and your wrongthinking and your wrongwanting, fire up your Google Earth... fly over to Iraq, just east of Mosul, zoom in on the ruins once known as Nineveh... open your Bible, consider Nahum, consider Romans, consider Revelation, and most of all, consider Christ, the lamb sacrificed for our sin!

Dedication as Evidenced by His Disciplining (1:12)

Finally, we want to see our Lord's faithfulness to us in his discipline. Nahum 1:12 says to us something very important – that in the midst of God destroying his enemies, he will

use them to discipline his children: 1:12b Though I have afflicted you [Judah], I will afflict you no more. God used Assyria as the rod to discipline his children. In other words, God will use oppression to expose our hearts, to smite our appetite for sin, to crush our idolatry, to prune, shape, form, and mold us into the image of his son. This is surely what the author of Hebrews tells us in chapter 12 – and although we don't have time to read it all here, I seriously commend it to you. We'll sample a few excerpts here: 5b My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives... 10b ...he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

We must learn, and learn well, that when hardship comes our way – whether from our own sin, the sin of others, circumstances we cannot control, evil in general, etc., one of the very first questions we must train ourselves to ask is, “What is God trying to teach me in this?” This is one of the great and governing truth-based perspectives that believers must learn to become very familiar with. And I cannot overemphasize how important it is to teach your children, especially your teens, to ask this question in times of hardship and to seek after an answer in prayer, consideration of the Word, and interaction with mature believers. I grew up in a family that had not learned to ask this question, and it would be hard for me to describe the amount of chaos and disillusionment that sometimes characterizes our lives. We are learning, but how much better to learn this lesson when one is young.

It is time to wrap up. In writing this conclusion I had all kinds of alternate endings, the words from a song by Charlie Peacock based on the 2 Peter 3 passage we briefly considered earlier; a conversation I had with PTSD researcher this week who works with war veterans about the radical harm that is often done during war to these men's sense of spirituality... but I ended up with the last portion of Revelation 22. This passage seems to take so many of the themes we have discussed these past three Sunday evenings and bring them together with striking clarity. Listen as I read verses 6 to the end:

Conclusion

And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without

price. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. [Pray]