

Nahum: The Lord is Our Stronghold

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Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed, and do what you have commanded. Amen.

Background

The name Nahum comes from the root "*comfort*" and it may be a shortened form of the name Nehemiah—which means "*The Lord has comforted.*"

But make no mistake, Nahum is certainly not a "feel good" or comforting book. Disturbing images of punishment and destruction are found throughout. It's a "Nahumdinger" of a book. ☺

Yet, Nahum is in the Bible for a reason. We need to train our ears to hear what God is saying through Nahum.

Nahum was from the town of Elkosh, but we don't know where this ancient town was exactly located.

During Nahum's life, King Josiah ruled the Southern Kingdom. While the temple in Jerusalem was being renovated, the king was made aware of a **Book of the Law** that was found in one of the storage closets, evidently by a member of the worship committee.

This rediscovery of likely the book of Deuteronomy helped bring about religious reform and renewal in Jerusalem. It also put an end to the synchronism and idolatry from Assyria that Israel had incorporated into their worship.

Some of the best poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures is found in Nahum:

*Clouds are the dust stirred up by God's feet ...
Nineveh is like a pool of water ebbing away.*

Most of the Hebrew prophets spoke against their own people.

But Nahum and Obadiah were different in that they delivered an oracle of judgment against the nations.

If you remember several weeks ago, Obadiah declared judgment on Edom, who betrayed Israel.

Nahum's book declares judgment on the city of Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria. It seems to have been written before the fall of Nineveh, somewhere between 663-612 BC.

Nineveh was in Northern Iraq, situated on the east bank of the Tigris River, near the modern city of Mosul.

The Assyrians were not a nice bunch of folks. Let me give you some examples:

- They would often roll their outer garments in blood before battle.
- Assyrian soldiers were known to throw children in the fire and cut off captors' hands. To be captured by the Assyrians was a fate worse than death.

So Nineveh was so much more than just a city for Israel—Nineveh was a **symbol**. This is an important key to interpreting the book. Nineveh was symbolic of evil, brutality, and everything that opposed God.

And so Nahum is a proclamation of good news and hope for all who feel dominated or bullied by evil or oppressive powers. Nahum also points us even further—to the end of days when the book of Revelation tells us that God “will wipe every tear from our eyes” and all wrongs will be righted.

But for those that abuse power, Nahum is a book of bad news and a final reckoning against cruelty and injustice. Do you remember the famous Hebrew prophet we recently studied who desperately sought to avoid Nineveh? **Jonah**. After studying about Nineveh, I can see why Jonah went in the exact opposite direction. You can say that Nahum and Jonah show flip sides of the same Nineveh coin.

In the book of Jonah, Nineveh repented and the city was spared—much to Jonah's chagrin. From Jonah we see God's mercy and forgiveness when the powerful and arrogant humbly repent.

Here in Nahum, there is a different lesson to be learned. It's some 200 years after Jonah. This time around, Nineveh is unrepentant and resistant to God. So here we learn about God's judgment of the arrogant and unrepentant.

The unthinkable eventually happened—the impenetrable and invincible Nineveh was totally destroyed in the 7th century BC and would never be rebuilt.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Let's read now from ...

Scripture: Nahum 1:1-15 (NRSV)

An oracle concerning Nineveh.
The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and rages against his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger but 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.
He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
and he dries up all the rivers;

Bashan and Carmel wither,
and the bloom of Lebanon fades.
The mountains quake before him,
and the hills melt;
the earth heaves before him,
the world and all who live in it.

Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and by him the rocks are broken in pieces.

The Lord is good,
a stronghold in a day of trouble;
he protects those who take refuge in him,
even in a rushing flood.
He will make a full end of his adversaries,
and will pursue his enemies into darkness.
Why do you plot against the Lord?

He will make an end;
no adversary will rise up twice.
Like thorns they are entangled,
like drunkards they are drunk;
they are consumed like dry straw.
From you one has gone out
who plots evil against the Lord,
one who counsels wickedness.

Good News for Judah

Thus says the Lord,
"Though they are at full strength and many,
they will be cut off and pass away.
Though I have afflicted you,
I will afflict you no more.
And now I will break off his yoke from you
and snap the bonds that bind you."

The Lord has commanded concerning you:
"Your name shall be perpetuated no longer;
from the house of your gods I will cut off
the carved image and the cast image.
I will make your grave, for you are worthless."

Look! On the mountains the feet of one
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!

Celebrate your festivals, O Judah,
fulfill your vows,
for never again shall the wicked invade you;
they are utterly cut off.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Nahum: The Lord is Our Stronghold

Nahum has several valuable and timely lessons for us in the 21st century—lessons that we don't often hear these days.

Lesson #1: God is good, but that doesn't mean God is *nice*.

They will not know we are Christians by our *niceness*, but by our *what? Love*.

There is a power to God's love. God is love AND God is a God of justice. The love of God isn't fluffy, there's some muscle to it. God has power to create ... and power over what he created. The power of God's love can protect and also vanquish evil.

Nahum helps put the fear of God in us. When Nahum says that God is jealous, it means that the one true God isn't loosey goosey about our loyalty to him. God expects 100% of our allegiance to him, and him alone. God doesn't allow for **time shares** with lesser gods and idols.

We need Nahum to help us see the complexity and mystery and power of God. He keeps us from having a God that is too small.

God is slow to anger **AND** an avenging God. Another translation puts it this way, "God is rich in wrath." This is surprising. Counter-intuitive—even contradictory at first blush. But then when you reflect on it—it's crucial to the character of God. I think sometimes we resist this, and are tempted to fashion God into our own image—you *know*, making God more tolerable, reasonable, civilized, likeable, easy-going, and smart—like us, *right?* Wrong. Nahum reminds us—our Creator isn't mamsy pamsy or a pushover or naive. He won't be duped or have the wool pulled over his eyes.

Jesus wasn't this way either. Remember Jesus, turning over tables in the temple? Or Jesus cursing the fruitless fig tree? You better believe Jesus exhibited anger in his ministry. But it was controlled and measured anger—not too much anger and not too little anger. A proper expression of anger is a sign of caring. That there are things that matter, that are important.

God cares enough and has enough power to change things. CS Lewis described this well when he said: "God is good, but certainly not safe."

If our good and holy God fails to address, or resist, or conquer evil, it's saying that God is either **resigned to evil** or **powerless to right it** or **just doesn't care**. Anger appropriately applied leads to action. God vanquished evil on the cross.

As [1 John 3:8 \(NRSV\)](#) says,

"The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to *destroy* the works of the devil."

God is not a people-pleaser. And we, being made in God's image, should be loving, but not people-pleasers either. And of course, this isn't a green light to be obnoxious or mean-spirited.

But sometimes in life you have to be OK with people not liking you, or even being mad at you—for the right reasons. Sometimes as a parent or a boss or a teacher, you have to be at the right time and in the right way a "compassionate jerk" so as not to enable bad behavior or abuse. Or be walked on.

Author Brené Brown is helping me with this—she says in her new book *Dare to Lead* that living an integrated life entails these three practices of having: a strong back, soft front, and a wild heart.

Strong back is a grounded confidence that has healthy and firm boundaries and integrity. Soft front is staying vulnerable, humble, loving, and curious in life. A wild heart brings together a strong back and a soft front. It integrates the two.

Faith in God inspires us to live with:

- grace AND grit,
- courage AND vulnerability,
- toughness AND kindness.

God, give us thick skins and tender hearts.

Nahum's 2nd Lesson is to beware of hubris and grandiosity.

We need to study history: Great cultures and powerful leaders have come and gone. Think of Rome, Babylon, Nineveh, and others. Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Sure, wealthy nations can spend massive amounts of money and brandish powerful weapons and call the shots—*for a time*. But no one is immune to or invincible to failure or calamity.

Nahum reminds us to keep that in mind and stay humble. To remember God is God, and I am not. We're small and frail creatures, and we need grace, forgiveness, and a good dose of humility on a daily basis.

The ancient rabbis had a saying: *Repent the day before you die.*

Rabbi--How do you know the day you will die?

- You don't, so repent every single day.
- *Then*, you will be able to repent the day before you die.

Nahum helps us ruthlessly ask ourselves:

- *Am I Israel in this situation?*
- *Or am I more like Nineveh?*

It's easy to think that we're in the right, and those who disagree with us are in the wrong. And so we **demonize** others and **angelize** ourselves.

We then feel justified doing misguided and terrible things in the name of being right. The truth is, we're usually a mixture of darkness and light. Usually others are a mixture of darkness and light. Not just pure evil.

Of course, there are situations where a person or group is clearly wrong—like genocide, mass shootings, terrorism, or child abuse. But the Bible reminds us most of the time—we're saints *and* sinners. A mixed bag. We need the Spirit and self-knowledge to sift our motivations. To see not only our **strengths**, but to get to know our **shadows**. Both need to be attended to.

Hands down, the most fun and difficult emotion to pronounce is **schadenfreude**. This is the experience of joy we have at the pain or suffering of others. There's definitely some **schadenfreude** going on in Nahum with the fall of Nineveh. This usually isn't the most healthy or mature of emotions.

There's another emotion we can foster that helps us keep in check our pride and pettiness, our schadenfreude. That's **mitfreude**. **Mitfreude** is the opposite of **schadenfreude**. **Mitfreude** means "joying with." When someone experiences something good in their lives (a promotion, an engagement, success), we not only congratulate them, we actively seek to feel their joy with them.

"Rejoice with those who rejoice" the Bible says.

Mitfreude builds empathy and kindness towards others and helps tame our fragile egos.

Another way we can cultivate humility, integrity, and repentance is to reflect on not only our **Baptismal Vows**, but our **Baptismal Renunciations in Reformed liturgy**.

The minister asks: *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?*

The one to be baptized responds: **I renounce them.**

One of our tasks as a follower of Jesus is to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. This keeps us doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

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Nahum's 3rd Lesson is that the Lord is a sure protection in times of trouble. Or as one translation says, "God is a haven on a day of distress and is mindful of those who seek refuge in him."

No one can stand against God. But also **God won't stand against** those who seek God for refuge. **God hears the cry of his people.** God is with us in the hard times. We're not left to our own devices. The goodness of God gets us through the bad times. God has the power and the desire to intervene. It's often times **in the crucible** and **on the anvil** that we learn about not only ourselves, but God.

We can have hope and courage under fire because God cares, God is there. God is refining us. Not only that—help is on the way.

But God's deliverance is **bad news** to those inflicting cruelty or abuse. Thank God, by the grace of God, we are a gospel people. A forgiven and forgiving people.

Immanuel, let us truly be who we are—Gospel People, Little Christs. So let us be good news, not bad news, to the world. And that will be good news for us.

Amen.

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