

Week of April 14, 2013
Nahum: A Message of God's Judgment

Passage Outline:

1. God Tempers Judgment with Mercy - Nahum 1:7-9,12-13
2. God Judges Evil Nations - Nahum 2:8-13
3. God Judges Sinful Leaders - Nahum 3:18-19

What's our study about and why is it important for us?

We will study how God judged Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh, because of their wickedness, rebellion, and acts of injustice. Our study will help you understand God's judgment and by His power pursue His righteousness.

1. God Tempers Judgment with Mercy - Nahum 1:7-9,12-13

⁷The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, ⁸but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness. ⁹Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time.... ¹²This is what the LORD says: "Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, O Judah, I will afflict you no more. ¹³Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away."

About 150 years before the prophet Nahum, God called Jonah to preach against Nineveh because the city's wickedness had caught God's attention (Jonah 1:1-2; see 3:2-4). Already in Jonah's day, the Assyrians were notorious for their brutality and cruelty. Miraculously, the Ninevites received Jonah's message and responded with sackcloth, ashes, and fasting (Jonah 3:4-9). God saw that the people of Nineveh "had turned from their evil ways", so He forgave them and did not send judgment against them (v. 10). Unfortunately, the Ninevites soon returned to their idols, cruel treatment of other nations, and wicked ways.

After Jonah, Assyria rose to prominence as a superpower in ancient Mesopotamia under the powerful leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.). After this notorious king, the great Neo-Assyrian Empire lasted for another 115 years until the Babylonians and the Medes destroyed the city of Nineveh in 612 B.C. During this time God gave Nahum a vision of the utter destruction of the city and the empire associated with it. The message of Nahum was that the Lord was "slow to anger," but He would not "leave the guilty unpunished" (Nah. 1:3). God revealed to Nahum what would happen to Nineveh. Because of their sin, God would revisit His judgment against that great city.

Read the articles "Nahum in its Historical Setting" and "The World Situation for the Seventh-Century Prophets" found in the heavy duty preparation packet.

Nahum reminds his people and us that the Lord is good. This word *good* refers to more than behavior; it points to God's willingness to be faithful to His covenant, first made with Abraham, then to Israel and later with David. We should rejoice and be thankful that God is faithful to the new covenant we have with Jesus Christ. But while the Lord is a good and merciful, we need to remember that He will judge wicked nations and people.

Nahum points this out by saying, God would completely destroy Nineveh. God's goodness does not prevent Him from judging wickedness. Because of His holiness, He will hold wicked people and nations accountable. People and nations need to repent to avoid God's judgment. God will come like an overwhelming flood, and He will chase His enemies into darkness. Again, the point is that God will not allow the wicked to go unpunished. Moreover, God is justified in judging those who conspire against Him. He will bring their plans to complete destruction.

Read the article “Nahum: Getting His Message Across” contained in the Heavy Duty Preparation Packet.

Note a Prophetic Formula, “This is what the Lord says” (v. 12) and signals the importance of this prophetic message. No matter how strong or great their number, God’s enemies will be mowed down. Even though God allowed the Assyrians to take His own people into captivity because of their disobedience, Assyria ought not think they can do as they please. God will hold them accountable.

Then in verse 13, God turns His attention to His people. For many years, God had warned Israel that her disobedience would lead to destruction. Then in 722 B.C., God allowed the Assyrians to carry the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity. But now God would break Assyria’s yoke of slavery from Judah. God will tear off Judah’s shackles. The image of the yoke and shackles is a common one from the ancient Near East referencing the burden of political domination. God is in control of all the nations of the world. Believers can find hope in knowing that God has the power to protect and deliver us, in spite of the wickedness in our world today.

The bottom line: God will not let the wicked go unpunished. But the good news is that He tempers His judgment with mercy. However, let us never take the mercy of God for granted; we need to understand that obedience to God is not optional. While this relationship is based on grace and faith in Christ, we come to God on His terms. In order to have a healthy, growing relationship with God, we must be obedient to His Word day by day.

2. God Judges Evil Nations - Nahum 2:8-13

⁸ Nineveh is like a pool, and its water is draining away. "Stop! Stop!" they cry, but no one turns back. ⁹ Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold! The supply is endless, the wealth from all its treasures! ¹⁰ She is pillaged, plundered, stripped! Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale. ¹¹ Where now is the lions' den, the place where they fed their young, where the lion and lioness went, and the cubs, with nothing to fear? ¹² The lion killed enough for his cubs and strangled the prey for his mate, filling his lairs with the kill and his dens with the prey. ¹³ "I am against you," declares the LORD Almighty. "I will burn up your chariots in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will leave you no prey on the earth. The voices of your messengers will no longer be heard."

The Nation of Assyria was famous, or should I say infamous, for their ruthless military campaigns, long and devastating sieges and torturous psychological warfare (2 Kings 18:16-37; Isa. 36). They were known for impaling prisoners on stakes and massive deportations (see 1 Chron. 5:6,26). In fact, the deportation of the Northern Kingdom was conducted with a long line with fish hooks in the noses of those deported people. That’s how Israel was deported to Assyria. They tortured their captives, severed noses, ears, or fingers, and gouged out eyes. Their purpose was to instill terror in their captured subjects.

With the Northern Kingdom already destroyed, Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) sent his servants to mock God in front of Hezekiah and all Jerusalem (Isa. 36:16-20). Sennacherib had attacked Jerusalem, but God had foiled his efforts and struck down the Assyrian army (2 Kings 18–19). God knew how Sennacherib and the Assyrians had mocked Him (Isa. 37:21-23); He would not let the Assyrians go unpunished.

Chapter 2 of Nahum describes the fall of Nineveh in frightening detail. Nineveh was built on the Tigris River, and two of its tributaries flowed through the city. In his vision, Nahum saw Nineveh was once a beautiful pool of water, but God pulled the plug and everything drained away. Like a cascading flow of water, the defenders of the city were fleeing before the Babylonians and Medes. Despite the cries to stop, the frightened soldiers fled headlong, like the water rapidly draining from a pool or gushing through a breach in a dam.

Without soldiers to defend and protect the city, Nineveh's wealth was ripe for looting. Assyrian kings drained conquered cities of their wealth and so Nineveh's wealth surpassed any other city in ancient times. But now the cry went up, "Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold!" Invaders madly rushed for the plunder. Nahum portrayed the shocking end of the city in the four final phrases describing the horror of the situation—Hearts melt, knees tremble, loins shake, every face grows pale!

Nations should not be deceived, thinking their sins will go unpunished. Assyrian kings hunted lions, kept lions in game preserves, and often compared their power to that of lions. Winged lions decorated Assyrian palaces. Even Isaiah (Isa. 5:26,29-30) and Jeremiah (Jer. 50:17) compared Assyria to a lion. But Nahum mockingly asked, Where is the lions' lair? Where was the place the pride rested and frolicked? Where had the lion mauled and strangled its prey with nothing to frighten them away? The lion's lair was Nineveh, but now it had been destroyed.

As Assyria so many times taunted her captives, so God threw Assyria's favorite self-depiction back at it. The great hunter had become the hunted; the taker of prey had become the prey instead. In a chilling and frightening warning, the Lord of Hosts declared to Assyria, I am against you. This phrase is often used in Ezekiel and Jeremiah, and simply says when God turns against a nation, escape is hopeless! Chariots will be burned. The sword will devour your strong soldiers.

It is easy to become discouraged when evil appears to prosper around us, but be assured that God will hold wicked people and nations accountable in His time.

3. God Judges Sinful Leaders - Nahum 3:18-19

¹⁸ O king of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. ¹⁹ Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

The Book of Nahum ends with a funeral address, a sad requiem for Assyria's leaders. The effect drives home the utter demise of Assyria. All that is left is the graveside eulogy.

Nahum addressed the king in a taunt-like fashion: King of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your officers sleep. The Assyrian kings liked to think of themselves as shepherds. But now these shepherds are asleep, which really describes death. Without shepherds, the king's people were scattered across the mountains like sheep gone astray. The irony is that there is no one to gather them together again. The great Assyrian Empire had crumbled and fallen apart. The people who once deported conquered nations from their homelands and placed them in unknown foreign countries were now refugees in lands not their own.

Assyria's battle wound was fatal. There was no remedy for the nation's injury; it was too severe. They are incurable. There would be no recovery. Nineveh would cease to exist.

Notice the unusual and unexpected response to the funeral dirge metaphor. Those who hear the news of the destruction and end of the Assyrian Empire would not mourn or bow in a moment of silence. Instead, they would clap their hands and celebrate, carrying the sense closer to mockery. The news that Nineveh had fallen would be cause for gloating over the misfortune of the city.

All because, as Nahum asks, who has not experienced your constant cruelty? There was no one in the ancient Near East who had not experienced the cruelty of the Assyrian leaders. No one. And what's more, the cruel treatments were not isolated occurrences; this evil was continuous.

How cruel and evil were the Assyrian leaders? Nahum called Nineveh a city of blood (3:1), and the Ninevites seemed to revel in this title. Assyrian kings enjoyed depicting their handiwork on reliefs in their

palaces. Prisoners were shown impaled with their feet and hands cut off. In one gruesome scene three stakes were erected with eight male heads skewered on each like human totem poles. In another scene, two prisoners are tied down while other Assyrians skin them alive.³ The skins were later staked up on the besieged city's walls for everyone to see. Kings sometimes would hang the heads of their enemies on trees in their gardens like Japanese lanterns.

The point is that the sinful leaders of Assyria had neglected their responsibilities and led the nation into wickedness. It is true that the people of Assyria were not totally guiltless, but their leaders bore particular responsibility. Leaders are to lead a nation. If the leaders are evil and without accountability, then it stands to reason that the nation will struggle. Other nations would then rejoice over God's judgment of Assyria. For Judah, it meant God had delivered His people.

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

1. Regardless of our circumstances, we can trust in God's promises.
2. Believers should hold their leaders accountable and call them to govern according to God's ethical and moral truth.
3. Believers need to realize that disobedience to God at any level will not prevail but will be exposed and severely punished by a holy and righteous God.