

NAHUM

The prophet of God's vengeance

Historical context. Nahum was a pre-exilic prophet who preached in the years prior to the fall of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, in 612 BC. Nahum's singular preoccupation was the upcoming destruction of Nineveh. In his introduction to the book, Peter Craigie writes:

This is not a tasteful or easy to read book due to its violent language. In order to understand its force and power, one must first attempt to enter Nahum's world.

Just as Nazi Germany still evokes the images of terror in the minds of those Jewish people who survived the holocaust, so too in Nahum's world Assyria was the embodiment of human evil and terror. Of all the oppressive imperial powers that have stained the pages of human history from the past to the present, Assyria claims a place of pre-eminence among evil nations. It was a nation with a long history, but during the first millennium B.C. it embarked upon a path of imperial expansion which knew no limitations of human decency and kindness. And among the many nations that experienced Assyria's cruelty, its invasion of territory and its ruthless military methods, the small state of Judah was but one. (The Daily Study Bible Series, Twelve Prophets, p.59)

In Nahum's time, Israel (Northern Kingdom) has been destroyed by the Assyrians, and Judah (Southern Kingdom) has suffered many attacks. So if Nahum sings and celebrates Nineveh's upcoming destruction, we can see why. He is regarded as one of the most eloquent orators in the Bible. Like Hosea, Nahum projects human emotions unto God, but unlike Hosea, he does not discriminate which emotions are worthy of God. One of the unique features of the book is that his total focus is on another nation, and not on Israel

Message. In the end, there will be judgment and punishment for those who do evil. Even though Isaiah and Micah see the Assyrians as God's instrument in punishing the infidelity of Israel and Judah, that does not mean that Assyria will not receive punishment for its sins.

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: "A jealous and avenging God is the Lord"

"A jealous and avenging God is the Lord.... The Lord brings vengeance on his adversaries...." (vv 1-2)

"The Lord is good, a refuge on the day of distress; he takes care of those who have recourse to him." (v.7)

If we tend to think of God as pleasant and nice, the opening verse of this book may shake us up a bit. It begins with Nahum calling God 'jealous and avenging.' Is he? In Exodus 20:5, God also describes himself as a 'jealous God.' God's jealousy is not like human jealousy when we don't want our spouse or friend to have any other friends. It is instead like the jealousy a man or woman feels when he/she wants to be the first love in his/her spouse's life. God's jealousy pertains to his zero tolerance for the presence of other gods in Israel's life, which they frequently tried to adhere to. *God's vengeance* is another way to speak of God's justice. God will not allow ongoing *unrepentance* to go unpunished. In this case, God will not permit the Assyrians to go on terrifying other nations, just as he did not allow the Nazis to carry on destroying the Jews and other nations. Hence, the message: *"God brings vengeance on his adversaries"* (v.2).

A God who is *'slow to anger'* (v.3). Thank God that our God is slow to anger and doesn't pounce on us the minute we sin. God does give us time to change our evil ways, but he will eventually punish evil—in this life or in the next. Frankly, sometimes we may wish God was not so slow to anger when it comes to the forces of evil that can oppress and terrify whole populations. Sometimes our problem with God is his timing, his slowness. Assyria was a terrifying power for three hundred years.

Verses 3-6 give a graphic personification of the terrifying forces of nature which are an expression of God's mighty power. Then verse 7 says God is good and takes care of those who have recourse to him. The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition states:

"The modern reader could, no doubt, benefit by taking on the ancient Hebrew's ability to deal with ambiguity when it comes to God: this means letting diverse or seemingly contradictory statements about God stand side by side. It is an acknowledgment that God is beyond our ability to completely explain. It also allows God's wrath to be seen as an expression of justice." (p.256)

Verses 12-14. God addresses Jerusalem who fears Assyria. Her enemy will be “*mown down and disappear*”(v.12).Of course, shortly after, in 587BC, another enemy, the Babylonians, destroy Jerusalem for her failure to repent and turn away from worshipping false gods. God had hoped Judah and Jerusalem would turn away from her sins and be spared, but she doesn’t.

Pause: What is your ability to deal with the seeming contradictory images of God found in the Bible, God’s love/vengeance, God’s love and jealousy?

CHAPTER 2: Fall of Nineveh

“*The hammer comes against you....*” (v.2)
“*The river gates are opened, the palace shudders.*”(v.7)
“*Emptiness, dissolution, waste; melting hearts and trembling knees....*” (v.11)
“*‘I will come against you,’ says the Lord of hosts; ‘I will consume your chariots....’*” (v.14)

Verses 2:3 foresees the restoration of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, which has been conquered by the Assyrians. It is one of the *unfulfilled* prophecies in the Bible.

Verses 2-14. Nahum anticipates the defeat of Nineveh. Though the destruction of the great city has yet to take place on the real stage of history, Nahum can see it with his mind’s eye as if the battle is being waged in front of him.

The city of Nineveh in seventh century BC was one of the most extraordinary cities in the ancient world. Some of its ruins can still be seen, just east of modern Mosul, about 250 miles north of Baghdad. No matter how powerful the city is and well protected by huge walls, it is no match for the ‘hammer of God’ who is coming against it, using the Babylonians to destroy the city. The destruction and terror it raged on others is now experienced by its inhabitants. The river gates are opened, letting in the devastating flood waters of the Tigris River; the once proud palace is reduced to shambles. And the city which was a treasure-house of loot stolen from other cities is now plundered.

Pause: What helps you to cope with all the violence in our world that our God allows to happen?

CHAPTER 3: A taunt song celebrating Nineveh’s downfall

“*Woe to the bloody city, all lies, full of plunder, whose looting never stops.*”(v.1)
“*...Who enslaved nations with her harlotries. ...I am coming against you....*” (vv 4-5)
“*All your fortresses are but fig trees....*” (v.12)
“*...O king of Assyria...your wound is mortal. All who hear this wound of yours clap their hands over you...*” (vv 18-19)

This chapter can be divided as follows: the siege and capture of the city are relived (vv 1-3), the guilty are punished (vv 4-17), victory is celebrated over the dying tyrant (vv 18-19). Regarding chapter three, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* states:

While reflecting upon the fate of Assyria, this chapter is taut with excitement. It erupts with anger, smirks with pent-up revenge, moves with unbelievable cruelty, and ends with a clap of victory over the dying victim. To express one’s fury this artistically, each sound and word had to be carefully crafted. Psychologically, anger has a necessary role in our life; nationally and internationally we badly need a way to release desperation and hatred and to be healed of our torturing scars; spiritually we have the inspired prophecy of Nahum. While not the height of perfection nor the only step leading to this height, it may be a necessary step somewhere along the way. (p.522)

At best, it is a warning that the “Assyria” of any age and place, or the brutal despot within each of us, will not be tolerated by God.

Pause: How did you react when you heard that Osama bin Laden had been killed? How did you feel about those who gathered outside the White House chanting and celebrating?

Concluding word

Nahum tells us that abuse of power may be unpunishable by man but it will not escape the wrath of God. He gives hope to those in totalitarian countries, teaching them to trust in God as the avenger of evil and as the source of security and peace for those who love him.

Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Daily Study Bible Series –Twelve Prophets 2