

Nahum 3
January 3, 2021

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: In what ways do people tend to minimize or underestimate the wrath of God? [Let people engage]

Transition: The prophet Nahum was given the job of revealing God's anger. There is no doctrine quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger or wrath of God. This is one attribute of God which many would like to forget. There are some who picture God as a kindly gentleman with a merry twinkle in his eye who cannot bear the thought of punishing anyone or judging anyone. However, it was Nahum's task to unfold the anger of God in this prophecy. It's uncomfortable to read. We're getting ready to see God's fury on a people whom He felt deserved it.

But let's keep something in mind. Remember that Nahum's name means "consolation," or "comfort," and as the Assyrian army was spread out around the city of Jerusalem, the prophet was given a message of consolation. You can imagine how consoling it was when the armies were right there with their terrible reputation as ruthless warriors, burning and destroying, raping and pillaging, killing the children and sparing no one, to have this prophet stand up in Jerusalem and declare to them that God would destroy Nineveh, the capital city of their enemies.

So this last chapter will be a welcomed read for those who were terrorized by the Assyrian army. Not so much if you are a Ninevite! Let's begin.

BOOK: ***Her violence and deceit to result in shame (3:1-7)***

- 3 Woe to the city of blood,
 full of lies,
 full of plunder,
 never without victims!
- 2 The crack of whips,
 the clatter of wheels,
 galloping horses
 and jolting chariots!
- 3 Charging cavalry,
 flashing swords
 and glittering spears!
 Many casualties,
 piles of dead,
 bodies without number,
 people stumbling over the corpses—
- 4 all because of the wanton lust of a harlot,

alluring, the mistress of sorceries,
who enslaved nations by her prostitution
and peoples by her witchcraft.

- 5 “I am against you,” declares the LORD Almighty.
“I will lift your skirts over your face.
I will show the nations your nakedness
and the kingdoms your shame.
6 I will pelt you with filth,
I will treat you with contempt
and make you a spectacle.
7 All who see you will flee from you and say,
‘Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?’
Where can I find anyone to comfort you?”

Her treatment of Thebes to result in her own defeat (3:8–11)

- 8 Are you better than Thebes,
situated on the Nile,
with water around her?
The river was her defense,
the waters her wall.
9 Cush and Egypt were her boundless strength;
Put and Libya were among her allies.
10 Yet she was taken captive
and went into exile.
Her infants were dashed to pieces
at the head of every street.
Lots were cast for her nobles,
and all her great men were put in chains.
11 You too will become drunk;
you will go into hiding
and seek refuge from the enemy.

Her defense efforts to be useless (3:12–19)

- 12 All your fortresses are like fig trees
with their first ripe fruit;
when they are shaken,
the figs fall into the mouth of the eater.
13 Look at your troops—
they are all women!
The gates of your land
are wide open to your enemies;
fire has consumed their bars.
14 Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your defenses!
Work the clay,

- tread the mortar,
repair the brickwork!
- 15 There the fire will devour you;
the sword will cut you down
and, like grasshoppers, consume you.
Multiply like grasshoppers,
multiply like locusts!
- 16 You have increased the number of your merchants
till they are more than the stars of the sky,
but like locusts they strip the land
and then fly away.
- 17 Your guards are like locusts,
your officials like swarms of locusts
that settle in the walls on a cold day—
but when the sun appears, they fly away,
and no one knows where.
- 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?

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

The world often displays a disturbing lack of justice. But such lack is largely due to an eroded or illusive standard of morality, which is applauded by many. Regardless of the wishes of the contemporary culture, Nahum teaches that there is an eternal God with an unbending standard of righteousness. He is not only Father and Shepherd; He is also King, Judge, and Warrior, a God of jealousy, vengeance, and wrath.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Na 3)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

III. God Is Just: Nineveh Deserves to Fall (3)

Here Nahum deals with the justice of this act. Some might say, "But God used Assyria to punish the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Why punish Nineveh when once He used her as His own tool?" Or they might argue, "Look at the kingdom of Judah. She is full of sin too. Why not punish her?" Well, God would punish Judah in a few years (606–586); He would permit the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people captive. But His purpose for Judah would be different from His purpose for Nineveh. God would chasten Judah in love to teach her a lesson; He would judge Assyria in anger to destroy her for her sins.

In 3:1 we see the great sins of Assyria listed: murders, lies, and covetousness. The Assyrians had murdered thousands of innocent people; now their own people would be slain and their bodies stacked in the streets like lumber. Nineveh had carried on a profitable commerce with the other nations and had grown rich through lies and violence. But now all their wealth would vanish in the hands of the looters. This is the justice of God. And in that day of judgment, the Assyrian soldiers (usually so brave) would act like frightened women. Every means of fortification would fail.

In vv. 15–17, Nahum compares the battle to a plague of locusts. Just as the worms eat up the crops, so the enemy would eat up the city. The Assyrian soldiers would be as strong as grasshoppers. Then in v. 18 Nahum sees the Assyrians as a slaughtered flock of sheep, their shepherds (rulers) sleeping in death.

The word "bruit" in v. 19 of the King James means "news, report." When the nations got the report of the destruction of Assyria, they clapped their hands and shouted for joy. The Lord judges the sins of nations and the sins of individuals. It is tragic to reject His warnings and persist in sin. "Be sure your sins will find you out."

Johnson, E. E. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 1502-1504) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

IV. The Reasons for God's Judgment on Nineveh (chap. 3)

This final section of the book continues the vigorous emotion and intensified tones of the second chapter. But the focus turns from the fact of judgment to the reasons for it. The prophet showed the spiritually depraved condition of the once-haughty and prosperous city.

A. Her violence and deceit to result in shame (3:1–7)

3:1. **Woe** is an interjection pronouncing either grief or, as here, impending death (cf. comments on Isa. 3:9). Nineveh was truly a **city of blood**—blood spilled by her uncontrolled lust and murder. She earned this title by her "atrocious practice of cutting off hands and feet, ears and noses, gouging out eyes, lopping off heads, and then binding them to vines or heaping them up before city gates [and] the utter fiendishness by which captives could be impaled or flayed alive through a process in which their skin was gradually and completely removed" (Maier, *The Book of Nahum: A Commentary*, p. 292). It was also a city of deception (**lies**). The tactics Assyria

followed when surrounding Jerusalem clearly display this characteristic (2 Kings 18:31). On Nineveh's plundering see comments on Nahum 2:9.

3:2–4. Nahum's accusation of Nineveh's guilt (v. 1) is followed by several terse descriptions of the final assault on the city. These statements are a progression from **whips**, to **wheels** and **horses** of **chariots**, to **cavalry** with **swords** and **spears**, to widespread slaughter and carnage (**bodies without number**). These describe the attack on Nineveh (cf. 2:3–4), which was surprisingly like Nineveh's own war tactics. She had piled up many dead bodies, but now the *Ninevites'* **corpses** would be piled up.

The reason for this terror is that she had lusted for power like the lusting **of a harlot**. Nineveh sold her military aid and power in order to lure **nations** under her control. By this statement Nahum may have also subtly alluded to Ishtar, the Assyrian-Babylonian goddess of sex and war, who was called a harlot and some of whose exploits were acts of savagery. Nineveh's control over others was exercised by **sorceries** and **witchcraft**. The Assyrians used hundreds of incantations in order to seek to foretell the future and influence others' lives; they also read omens in the movements of birds, animals, clouds, and in dreams.

3:5–7. Her shameless actions against others would be matched by shameless exposure. God was **against** her (cf. comments on 2:13) and is against every nation, no matter how wealthy, powerful, or self-sufficient it may be, that disregards divine authority and tramples on human life. God said He would uncover what the privacy of her **skirts** had once covered (cf. the similar fate of Babylon, Isa. 47:1–3; and Jerusalem, Ezek. 16:37). She had caused others disgrace and **shame** by her prostitution, but now *she* would be shamed. Added to this indignity would be the disgrace of being pelted **with filth** (human excrement) and **contempt**. The Hebrew word for filth (*šiqqûš*) is used of anything that is detestable. It often refers to idols (e.g., Deut. 29:17; Jer. 4:1; Ezekiel 20:7–8). Nineveh's glory would turn into filth.

Nineveh's shame would reach a climax when she would be **in ruins** and have no one **to comfort** her. Her cruelties had irreconcilably estranged her victims. The once-attractive harlot would be exposed in shame and would no longer be attractive to anyone.

B. Her treatment of Thebes to result in her own defeat (3:8–11)

3:8. Nineveh's strength, God said, would be no greater than that of the Egyptian city of **Thebes**, which Assyria had conquered in 663 B.C. Before that date Jeremiah (Jer. 46:25) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 30:14, 16) had predicted Thebes' fall. The Hebrews called the city No-Amon (city of the god Amun). Thebes was at the site of modern-day Karnak and Luxor, 400 miles south of Cairo. The city was built on the eastern bank of **the Nile River**, but its suburbs were on both shores. One strength of Thebes was her strategic location. **Water** was all **around her**, that is, moats, canals, and water channels flowed throughout much of the city. These helped defend the city as enemy soldiers would find it difficult to cross numerous canals to get to the heart of the city. The **waters** were thus like a **wall**. In this way Nineveh and Thebes were similar (cf. Nahum 2:8).

3:9. Another strength of Thebes was her support by notable alliances and their almost limitless resources. Nineveh, by contrast, had no allies. Thebes was the most prominent city in **Cush**, the region of the upper Nile River, which corresponds to present-day southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia. The lower Nile region was known as **Egypt**, and at that time this territory was subjugated by Cush. While **Put** is sometimes identified as **Libya**, the mention of both here favors a location for Put on the coast of the Red Sea as far south as present-day

Somaliland. The Libyans inhabited the territory west of Egypt. So, Thebes' **allies** were south, north, east, and west of her. Yet their combined help was unable to defend her against Nineveh.

3:10. In spite of her strength, Thebes endured an ignominious end. Assyrian records describe in detail the conquest of Thebes. Most of the people of Thebes were **taken ... into exile**. (Similarly, many Ninevites would be exiled, 2:7.) Rather than taking Thebian **infants** into captivity, the Assyrians ruthlessly massacred them (cf. Hosea 13:16; other nations did the same: Ps. 137:9; Isa. 13:16, 18; Hosea 10:14). The Assyrians did this in full view of many Thebians **at the intersection (head) of every street**. This created maximum fear and agony among the people and also helped wipe out a future generation of Thebians. Such terrible atrocities added to Nineveh's deep guilt. While many of the people of the great city of Thebes were herded into captivity, the nobility was bid for by casting **lots**, perhaps to become the Ninevites' slaves, a humbling experience.

3:11. Nineveh's treatment of Thebes would be turned back on Nineveh. Like **drunk** persons, the Ninevites would be bereft of sense and direction under attack, frantically seeking to hide. Also, the people of Nineveh literally became drunk (cf. 1:10) with intoxicants, which contributed to their aimless tottering and inability to defend themselves.

C. Her defense efforts to be useless (3:12–19)

3:12. Under attack by the Medes, Scythians, and Babylonians, Nineveh would find that its **fortresses** were weak. The initial yield on **fig trees** (cf. Num. 13:20) in the spring (which is followed by a later crop; see comments on Song 2:13) falls easily to the ground when the tree is **shaken**. The figs **fall**, as it were, **into the mouth of the eater** with the slightest effort. Similarly, Nineveh's defenses would easily and quickly succumb to the attackers. This was actually the case in 612 B.C.

3:13. Seeing the attackers, the men trying to defend the city would lose their courage and become like **women**, afraid and defenseless (cf. Isa. 19:16; Jer. 50:37; 51:30). The dreaded Assyrians, ferocious as lions, would become weak.

Because of the destructive effect of the floodwaters on the city (see comments on 2:6), enemy soldiers were able to enter it. Then they set **fire** to the city **gates** and their **bars** (cf. Isa. 10:16–17) and rushed headlong into the city.

3:14. Nineveh's efforts at defense would be no match for the Lord's judgment. The scene of the destruction moves from the fortresses and gates (vv. 12–13) to within the city itself (vv. 14–17).

In ridiculing irony (cf. 2:1; also see 3:15) Nahum again ordered the Ninevites to defend themselves. When a city is under **siege**, one of its most urgent needs is an adequate supply of clean drinking **water**. And when the enemy would tear off some of the bricks of the city's wall (as the Assyrians often did), the city under attack would need to **repair** those weakened places in the walls with new bricks and **mortar**. In Nehemiah 3:19 the past tense of the Hebrew word here translated **strengthen** is rendered "repaired." Nineveh's ruins include traces of a counter wall built by the inhabitants to defend the city near places where the enemy had broken down some of the city's **defenses**.

3:15–17. When those defense efforts would prove futile, then disaster would strike with fire and **sword**. On destruction by **fire** see point 6 on the chart "Fulfillments of Nahum's Prophecies," in the *Introduction*. The attacking soldiers entered the city, killing many of the people with swords. The soldiers were **like grasshoppers**, consuming and destroying entire crops for miles (on devastation caused by grasshoppers and locusts, see comments on Joel 1:2–

13). Nahum's command to **multiply like grasshoppers** and **like locusts** may be directed to the Ninevites to increase their numbers (as if they could!) to defend themselves more adequately. Or it may be addressed to the enemy to increase themselves (to be successful) in their conquest of Nineveh.

Again, the prophet spoke of **locusts** (Nahum 3:16). The city had **increased** its wealth by commercial trading with numberless **merchants**, but they would become like countless locusts stripping **the land** of its vegetation. Nineveh had acquired vast amounts of wealth by trading (probably often done deceptively; see comments on v. 4), but now those merchants by looting would take back much merchandise. Neither military power (v. 15) nor wealth (v. 16) could deliver the Ninevites.

The **locusts** provided still another point of comparison (v. 17). When Nineveh would be attacked her military **guards** and national **officials** would be so afraid (cf. v. 13a) that they would escape overnight. In the cool of the evening, locusts settle on walls but when the warmth of the sun comes in the morning, **they fly away**. Similarly, in panic the guards on the walls would also suddenly vanish.

3:18. The final dirge-like words in verses 18–19 may be addressed to Sin-shar-ishkun, the **king** who was ruling Nineveh when it was destroyed in 612 B.C. or, perhaps more likely, to King *Ashur-uballit* (612–609 B.C.) who tried to hold together the Assyrian Empire in the city of Haran, until it finally crumbled completely in 609, three years after Nineveh's fall. In surveying his devastated empire, he would realize that his leaders (**shepherds** and **nobles**) were dead (spoken of as if they were sheep; cf. Pss. 13:3; 76:6; Dan. 12:2) and that **people** who were not taken as captives were **scattered**, never again to be gathered. This empire that for centuries had been invincible would be totally disintegrated.

3:19. The devastation of the burned and looted city of Nineveh would look like a **wound** (cf. Isa. 1:6–7). So **fatal** and final was her fall that she would never be rebuilt. Archeology has confirmed this fact. Peoples who had been oppressed by the brutally atrocious Ninevites would now rejoice in her demise. Judah especially would be greatly comforted by the fact that Nineveh's fall would mean the end (cf. Nahum 1:8–9) of the seemingly **endless cruelty** that had lasted for centuries. In this way the Lord would pour out His wrath (cf. 1:2–3, 6) on Nineveh and demonstrate His care for those who trust in Him (1:7). Readers today know from the Book of Nahum that God's wrath will eventually fall on inveterate sinners and can be comforted by knowing that those who turn to Him are safe.

Clendenen, E. R. (1998). The Minor Prophets. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman concise Bible commentary (pp. 371–372). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Second Description (3:1–19). Like the previous section, this one includes a description of Nineveh's fall followed by a taunt. It begins as a funerary lament for a much-deserved death. Several wordplays add to the effectiveness of this visionary portrayal of judgment. What was before an "endless" supply of "wealth" (2:9) has been replaced by "piles" of corpses "without number." Because of her "many harlotries" (NIV, "wanton lust" in 3:4) Nineveh has "many casualties."

The Lord promises utter humiliation to a once proud city that trusted in her fortifications. Like Thebes, she is now desolate. Nineveh's fortifications will provide no refuge from the fire of God's wrath. She is as helpless as crops before a locust plague. Also, like a hoard of locusts Assyria will soon disappear. The chapter ends as it began with a lament that turns to celebration because of their "endless cruelty."

Theological and Ethical Significance. The world often displays a disturbing lack of justice. But such lack is largely due to an eroded or illusive standard of morality, which is applauded by many. Regardless of the wishes of the contemporary culture, Nahum teaches that there is an eternal God with an unbending standard of righteousness. He is not only Father and Shepherd; He is also King, Judge, and Warrior, a God of jealousy, vengeance, and wrath (see Ps. 94:1; Isa. 63:1–6; Jer. 50:28–29; Mic. 5:15). He will exercise punitive retribution to vindicate His glorious name and to deliver those who have fled humbly to Him for refuge (Deut. 32:43; Isa. 34:8; 35:4; 59:18; 61:2). Without God’s vengeance there will be no justice and no deliverance. His vengeance is in part a result of His jealousy, which is best defined as the zeal with which He maintains His relationship with His people.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Na 3:1-19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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