

Nahum: The Second Prophet to Nineveh

(One in a summer series: People of Faith Not Found in Hebrews Eleven)

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By Jack Heppner

The Context

Nahum is the second prophet called of God to speak his word to the city of Nineveh, the centre of power of the great Assyrian Empire. A hundred and fifty years earlier God had called **Jonah** to call upon the city to repent or it would be destroyed. We know the story...How Jonah was afraid to go to that wicked city and ran away from the calling. How God finally convinced Jonah to go speak his word to the city, and how it repented and was spared destruction. How Jonah then was upset with God that he had shown grace to the repentant city. He even got depressed about it and angry with God that his prophecy of destruction had not come true! The story of Jonah ends with that great proclamation of grace in 4:11. ***Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle.*** We see a God who is gracious far beyond what Jonah thought he should be.

I can relate to Jonah and the story of how God's grace and mercy prevailed in the end. Somehow it parallels the gospel story of the New Testament. All we like sheep have gone astray – all have sinned, all are guilty before a righteous God. We have heard the joyful sound that if we repent of our sins and turn to God he is ready to forgive our sins, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and spare us the consequences of unbelief and a life of sin.

But Nahum and his prophecy against Nineveh is another matter. Most scholars agree that this prophecy takes place about 150 years later. It appears as though Nineveh's period of repentance following Jonah's prophecy was short lived. A century and a half later, there was no memory of repentance left in the city. It had reverted to its old ways and even intensified its wickedness. Nineveh, was the seat of power of the most powerful nation of the world at that time, Assyria. In that respect, it would compare to Washington, DC in the United States today.

Assyria was known for its brutal foreign policy. When it conquered a nation its strategy was to loot anything of value, including people who could serve them as slaves, and take it back to their capital city to enhance its glory. The rest was generally destroyed or left destitute and then the land was resettled by foreigners under its command. This is what Assyria had done to the ten northern tribes of Israel in 722 B.C. Shalmanezar V marched his armies into Israel and after a three year siege, Samaria surrendered. Israelites of any worth were taken away and the land was resettled by colonists from the Assyrian empire. With time they intermingled with the poor, lower class of Israelites who had been left behind. This mixed race that developed, known as the Samaritans in the time of Christ, were despised and rejected by the Jews because of their mixed ancestry. The southern

two tribes of Judah and Benjamin had been spared, although they ended up paying heavy tributary payments to keep the Assyrians at bay. But the threat of total destruction, like had happened to the ten northern tribes always loomed over their heads. Nineveh was a threat and hated as an enemy of God and his people!

It was in this context, probably around 620 B.C., that Nahum was called of God to prophecy against Nineveh, which represented the whole Assyrian dynasty. But this prophecy differed significantly from that of Jonah. Jonah held out hope for Nineveh, if it would repent of its wickedness. Nahum doesn't hold out any hope. God's cup of wrath is full and judgement is certain. Jonah faced the Ninevites eyeball to eyeball. There is no indication in the text that Nahum actually went to Nineveh. It appears as though he wrote this "oracle concerning Nineveh" from a safe distance. It appears that the purpose of Nahum's oracle was designed to comfort Israel, now generally known as Judah, more so than to challenge the Ninevites.

The Oracle Itself

In Chapter One we find a psalm which focuses on the Lord's majesty. The Lord is slow to anger and of great might, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty (v. 3). He rebukes the sea and makes it dry up...the mountains quake before him (v. 4-5) The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a full end of his adversaries...(v.7-8). Thus says the Lord, Though they be strong and many, they will be cut off...I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds asunder (v.12-13). Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings...(obviously the tidings that Assyria, the great northern threat has fallen!) It is quite clear this psalm is meant to be heard by the beleaguered people of Judah and to encourage them. Deliverance is coming!

In Chapter Two we read about the siege and downfall of Nineveh. But even here the prophecy of this destruction of the enemy is prefaced by a word of comfort to Judah...*The Lord is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel...(v.2)*. The rest of the chapter is often considered the most graphic and dynamic poetry in the Hebrew language. From other sources we know that the destruction of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire came at the hands of the rising Babylonian power to the South and the Medes to the east. Together they besieged the city. It appears as though the break came when the river gates gave way because of the flooding river running through the city (v. 6). When this happened there is great confusion in the city because its leaders are totally unprepared for this turn of events.

Read 2:3-10.

The historian Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century B.C. declares, "There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken until the river became an enemy of the city. And in the third year of the siege, the river being swollen with continual rains, overflowed every part of the city and broke down the wall for twenty furlongs. Then the

king, thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river become an enemy to the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace and, gathering together all his wealth and his concubines and eunuchs, burned himself and the palace with them all, and the enemy entered the breach that the waters had made and took the city.”

In Chapter Three Nahum gives the reasons why the city and the empire will be destroyed. *Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and booty – no end to the plunder (v. 1).* It appears that their politics and foreign policy was filled with deception, lies, dishonesty and greed – all designed to enhance their own power and privilege. *Graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her harlotries and peoples with her charms (v.4).* It seems that they had no qualms about breaking treaties and promises, as long as it would benefit them. *You increased your merchants, more than the stars of heaven more than the stars of the heavens. The locust spreads its wings and flies away. Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold – when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they are (v. 16).* Apparently their economy was shot through with corruption and profiteering on the backs of the less fortunate.

And so Nahum paints the picture of the destruction of Nineveh, as it in fact happened in the year 612 B.C. If I had a choice, I am not sure who I would rather be – Jonah or Nahum. **Jonah** at least carried a message of hope if there would be repentance. But he had to overcome a lot of fear and gather up his courage to walk the streets of Nineveh and proclaim a gospel of hope if there was repentance. And he witnessed how effective his message was, so much so that it gave him a case of depression. **Nahum**, as far as we know, remained in the safe confines of his own people in Judah who were happy to hear the news of the coming destruction of their arch enemy, the Assyrians. But with respect to Nineveh, his message contained no shred of hope. He was called to declare that judgement was inevitable. Good news for Judah, but bad news for Assyria. **Who would you rather have been?**

The Value of the Story

What is the value of this dramatic prophecy and its fulfillment for us today, August 1, 2004. Is it just an interesting story to entertain those who stayed home on a long weekend in summer? Or does it carry the seeds of some messages for us in our day?

First, we are reminded that Power is often followed by Corruption and Judgement

There is a saying that “*Power Corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*” I believe this saying is true. You don’t have to rise much above the level of a fool to recognize this, unless of course, you are the one holding the power. Then it seems you become blind to this truth. In the course of political history, this tendency to absolute corruption is curbed if there is another power of similar strength around. We call this a *balance of power*, and it tends to keep even strong nations somewhat in line. Each nation must stay alert and try to win the hearts of its people and those of surrounding nations.

But always, in the course of history, when one empire stands alone at the top, the process of **corruption, disintegration and ultimately judgement** tends to speed up. This was true of the once mighty Pharaohs of Egypt. And in our text it was true of Assyria, after it beat up on Thebes (3.8), which was the capital city of Egypt. Looking ahead, it would be true of the Babylonian Empire (612-536). Then it applied to the Persian Empire (538-333). Then the Greek Empires of Alexander the Great for a dozen years, then the Ptolomies of Egypt, followed by the Syrian Empire of the North. Then it was the Roman Empire. Then in the Middle Ages the Holy Roman Empire. Then, as we skip through history, the British Empire, followed by Hitler's Germany. Then it was the Soviet Union standing in balance of course with the USA. Now, since the collapse of communism, the USA stands alone at the top in the world.

Always, it seems the cycle runs full circle, and I have no reason to suspect that this pattern will cease to exist. Ultimate power, followed by corruption, followed in turn by judgement. It is the way the world works. (I recommend watching the movie, *Fahrenheit 9/11*.)

I admit that I struggle to understand the concept of judgement that comes to nations, such as we read about in the book of Nahum. On the one hand the language of the biblical text attributes such judgement to God. The message that Nahum speaks to Nineveh is that of God's judgement. There seems to be a delight in talking about dashing out the brains of infants against rocks and reeking havoc on everything that lives. It almost seems as though God and his people enjoy such acts of what today would be called *genocide*.

Archie Penner wrestles long and hard with this issue in his book, *The Divine Covenants*. His main contention is that the God we know as Yahweh in the Old Testament is the same God we see reflected in Jesus in the New Testament. We don't have two different Gods. So, he argues, that whatever is attributed to Yahweh in the Old Testament, must also be true of Jesus of Nazareth. And we are told in the New Testament that Jesus is the most complete revelation of the heart of God. So he asks whether we could imagine Jesus speaking this way – delighting in dashing out the brains of little innocent babies because they are born on the wrong side of the fence at the wrong time.

This is a bigger topic than we can embrace this morning. But I think Archie Penner has a point when he suggests that judgement is often brought on our own heads by our own actions. It may appear as though God is bringing his wrath upon empires and innocent children, and the bible even such language. But when everything is stripped back to the bare bone, it is perhaps not so much God who does the beating up of nations and empires, as it is these nations bringing the roof down upon themselves by their own corruption. When the rot has come to a breaking point, there will always be another power that will rise up to afflict "judgement" on the crumbling nation. It is the way God's world works. So it might be proper to say that it is God inflicting judgement, because after all it is God's world and he has created all things, including the laws of cause and effect. Yet, having come to know something of the heart of God as reflected in Jesus, I find it hard to imagine my God taking delight in the destruction of those whom he has created, as the text in Nahum seems to imply.

So in regards to judgement, whether it is on a national scale or on a personal scale, the axiom “You reap what you sow” remains largely true. I don’t know why God did not give the Ninevites a chance at repentance like he did in Jonah’s day. Perhaps because the internal rot had gone so far that it was inevitable that the roof would come down. Perhaps it was already beginning to crumble as the prophecy was given. I don’t know.

But one thing I do draw from this story, is that we must be alert to the corrupting influence of power, whether it is on a national level, a local level, a church level, or a personal level. ***When power is not balanced with love and compassion, it will corrupt and judgement is inevitable. We will reap what we sow.*** I will let you make the application where you think it most appropriate.

The Second thing I draw from this book comes from the example of Nahum

Nahum was called to a difficult task – to speak words of truth and judgement even though he knew there would be no response. **Jonah** could at least think that his job might have an effect. That he might be successful. That he would be able to write home in his missionary prayer letters of the success of his mission. **Nahum**, on the other hand, knew that there was no hope left for Nineveh, yet he was called to speak the truth. From the side it appears as though he is speaking into the wind. But he does what he is called to do.

Personally, I would rather be involved in a successful mission where God’s grace and mercy shine through. But sometimes God calls us as individuals, and maybe even as churches, to speak and act on his behalf even when we know in advance that there will be little or no response. What do we do when this happens? Do we find an excuse like saying “Its no use wasting my time and energy on something that won’t bring results anyway.” Or do we carry through on God’s call irrespective of what the results are likely to be. That is simply being faithful to what God calls us to - no matter where the chips fall.

Does a parent keep loving a wayward child when all indicators point in the direction of self-destruction? Do we conduct ourselves honestly in our business and dealings, while others are getting away with dishonesty, even if it means a loss on our part? Do I speak and write what God lays on my heart even though it threatens people and isolates me from the community I long to be a part of? If we follow the example of Nahum, we will follow God’s directive, irrespective of the hope of success.

And finally, this story reminds me that even though I may be surrounded by misused power, corruption and disintegration, I can lean on God for my strength.

For the nations of Judah and Benjamin, now referred to as Israel because the ten northern tribes were already gone, Nahum offers a word of comfort. Yes, says Nahum, I know how you are burdened down and oppressed on every side. But let me tell you something, ***The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him (1:7). And, Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Keep your feasts O Judah, fulfill your vows... (1:15).***

Do you sometimes feel burdened down by the troubles of life; by pain and sorrow, by unfulfilled dreams, by unexpected losses or by broken relationships? Do you sometimes feel crushed by “the powers that be” that are running rough shod over you leaving you helpless, vulnerable and without much hope? Do you ever feel that when you try to get some help for your problems that you get the run around from those who might be able to help you, or even a cold shoulder where you expected to find comfort?

Then these words of Nahum to a beleaguered nation can bring you comfort.

The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him (1:7). And, Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Keep your feasts O Judah, fulfill your vows... (1:15). In spite of all our struggles, we can continue to “keep our feasts and fulfill our vows to God,” because we know that God sees us, hears us and will come to our defense in due time. That is to say, we continue to worship God and serve him the best we can, in spite of our circumstances.

Conclusion

So as we think of this largely unknown prophet, Nahum, let us be alert against the corrupting influence of power when not combined with love and compassion. Let us be determined to follow through on what God calls us to do, even when success in human eyes seems unlikely, and let us be encouraged to know that we can lean on the Lord in our time of trouble, whatever that may be.

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