

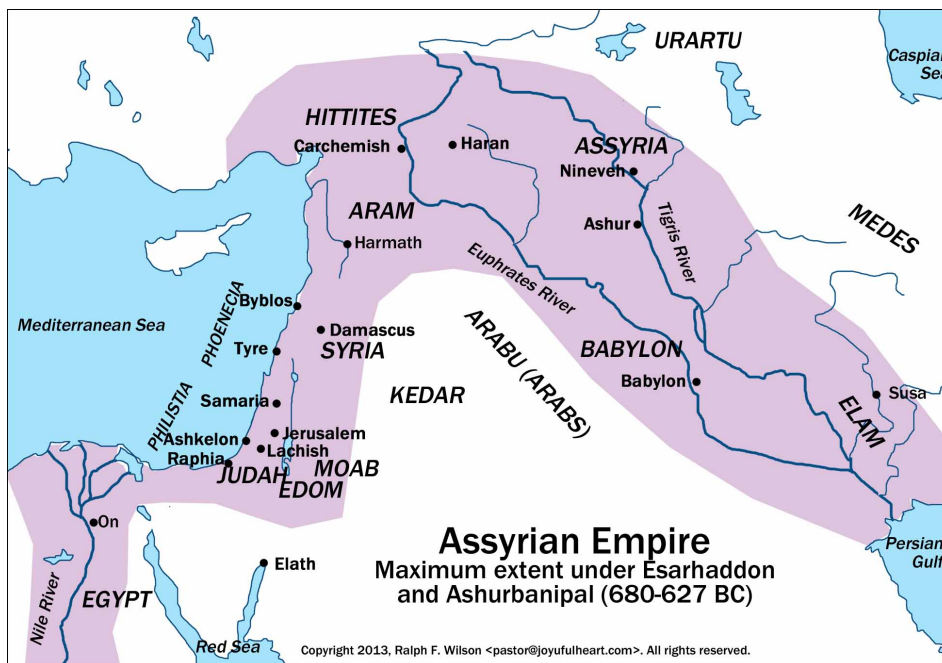
Followers of the Way

FOTW Sermon 6

23 January 2022

Nahum 1

The prophet Nahum pronounces “an oracle concerning Nineveh” (Nahum 1:1), capital of the Assyrian empire. He’s writing in the 7th century BC, as Nineveh is about to be destroyed by armies from Babylon and its allies. For over two hundred years, Assyria had brutally ruled its subject peoples and threatened surrounding nations. In 722 BC, some while before Nahum spoke, Assyria had invaded and destroyed the northern Israelite kingdom of Israel, taking its people away into captivity and settling the land with foreigners brought in from elsewhere in their empire. Now, unsuspected by Assyrian leaders or the wider world, a confederation led by the rising power of Babylon is gathering against it.



At its greatest extent, the Assyrian empire covered a huge territory – the whole of what we call the Fertile Crescent plus the Levant and Egypt. Yet what we hear from Nahum isn’t limited in time and place. There are specifics that relate to Nineveh and its overlords, but what’s spoken is of universal application. As well as the Assyrian capital, the prophet mentions three other places by name in this first chapter – Bashan, Carmel and Lebanon (Nahum 1:4). Bashan straddles the modern Syria-Israel border area, encompassing the Golan heights and land to the east-northeast. Carmel is a mountain in north-west Israel where Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 18). Biblical Lebanon is the southern part of the country that bears this name today. Later, he also mentions the Egyptian capital Thebes and Egypt’s allies Cush and Put: Nahum 3:8-9. (Cush is often identified with Ethiopia and Put with modern Somaliland and Yemen).

Almost nothing is known about Nahum apart from what little this book itself tells us. It says he’s an Elkoshite (Nahum 1:1), meaning he comes from Elkashai. And since Elkosh means something like, “God snares”, we infer this is a man who’s been snared by God. He was a prophet and also a skilled wordsmith, who employs some of the classic devices of Hebrew poetry:

- Stating a proposition, then expanding on it within the same verse or phrase: so, “the LORD takes vengeance ... the LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies” (Nahum 1:2);
- Not rhyming sounds, but rhyming ideas: so, “The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it.” (Nahum 1:5);
- Using acrostics, where each line starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (The book starts like this, but doesn’t follow this scheme all the way through.)

Since this is poetry, it has to be read accordingly – we don’t read poetry the way we read history, or letters, or straightforward prose. (In keeping with the prophetic nature of the book, we move between sections that relate to Nineveh and Judah, but also parts that foresee the coming Messiah and describe evil spiritual forces that are at work throughout the ages.) As we look at it in more details, we’ll find this book conveys deep truths about God’s power, character and dealings with the nations.

God’s power

Nahum confronts us with the raw power of God and underlines His complete command over nature: “The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it.” (Nahum 1:5). All the elements submit to Him. Not just the land, but also the waters: “He rebukes the sea and it dries up; he makes all the rivers run dry.” (Nahum 1:4). And not just the waters, but the heavens: “His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.” (Nahum 1:2).

However, the prophet isn’t speaking just about God’s power, but also about His character and His actions. What Nahum says helps us understand the framework in which God *uses* His power – the emotional drivers of why He does what he does – and how God *responds* to human choices both on a personal and corporate (national) level. So, we’ll next consider what this chapter says concerning God’s character, then look at how this translates into His dealings with nations.

God’s character

The prophet describes characteristics of God the modern Western world would rather not think about. He’s “jealous and avenging ... and is filled with wrath.” (Nahum 1:1). He feels “indignation ... [and] fierce anger” (Nahum 1:6). Before we go any further down this track, we need to be careful to understand what words truly mean, rather than simply what we think they mean. Jealousy has an overwhelmingly negative connotation for us, as it’s usually associated with romantic (especially, sexual) relationships. But to be jealous is also to be solicitous or anxiously watchful over honour or rights. In the context of God’s dealings with humanity, it conveys God’s requirement for exclusive devotion from His people.

That’s hardly too much to ask, since in return He shows “unfailing love” (Exodus 15:3, a phrase many times repeated throughout the Psalms and the Prophets) and “unfailing kindness” (2 Samuel 22:51, Psalm 18:50). It’s strange how loud people complain about the idea of God asking to be treated with the respect and honour that are His due. We don’t seem to have quite the same issue where human dignitaries are concerned.

Likewise, to avenge is to vindicate by punishing a wrongdoer, to exact satisfaction for an injury, to inflict punishment on account of someone or something. When used properly and proportionately, vengeance is an aspect of justice. In human hands, vengeance often strays beyond proper bounds

and becomes excessive retribution – one reason God tells us to leave the job to Him: “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I will repay.” (Romans 12:19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35).

There’s something else we need to recognise if we’re to reach a proper evaluation of who God is and how He acts. The false gods of the pagan world are fronts for evil spirit powers: capricious, uncaring and cruel. They demand blood sacrifice, treat human beings as playthings and stir up behaviour that St Paul tells us belongs to a sinful nature: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.” (Galatians 5:19-21).

The LORD, by contrast, is full of mercy and lovingkindness. The fruit of submitting ourselves to His ways and His laws is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23). When He judges, he acts proportionately and only as a last resort. Thus, He “takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies.” (Nahum 1:2). This isn’t the megalomaniac exercise of unfettered power, but a measured response in the face of repeated and grave provocations.

And, of course, there’s another side to God’s character. The counterpoint to His jealousy, vengeance, indignation and wrath is that “the LORD is slow to anger” (Nahum 1:3). Nahum affirms that “the LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” (Nahum 1:7). (Cf: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble: Psalm 46:1.)

We can lie by speaking outright falsehoods, but we can also lie by telling a half truth or deliberately withholding facts. If we fail to proclaim who God is in the totality of His being, we’re telling a lie. If we play up one side of His nature but ignore or downplay another, we’re lying about who He is. It’s in our human nature, of course, that we tend to get things out of kilter. Our minds are too small and our vision too limited to hold properly in tension the things that seem to us paradoxical or illogical, like God’s love and mercy on the one hand and His justice and holiness on the other. Each tradition and each generation tend to have their particular blind spot. The Victorians perhaps went too far in the direction of hellfire and damnation. Our own age does the opposite.

But the fact is that too many people who claim to be believers have been misrepresenting who God is. We’ve failed to put in proper context the things He is doing, and why. The result has been to leave people with a false impression of where they stand and how they need to respond to their Creator. This isn’t kindness on our part. It isn’t “meeting people where they are” or “being relevant”. It’s a dereliction of duty and it runs the risk of allowing many to go to eternal damnation who might have been saved had we been more honest.

God’s dealings with nations

Which brings us to how God uses His power. His actions are an outworking of His character, for His justice and faithfulness demand that “He will not leave the guilty unpunished.” (Nahum 1:3). And so, “with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness.” (Nahum 1:8). This is exactly what happened. Nineveh was destroyed by forces under the leadership of the Babylonian king Nabopolassar in 612 BC. It was obliterated so completely that there was a time when people wanting to debunk the Bible denied there’d ever been such a place. They had to eat their words when Nineveh’s ruins were excavated by Austin Henry Layard from 1845-7.

Nahum’s prophecy wasn’t just correct in outline, but in every detail. Nineveh was renowned for her strong defences. Her mighty walls and moat were built to withstand a long siege, but she fell after

only a few months' encirclement when floodwaters from a tributary of the River Tigris swept away a vital section of the ramparts. This was the "overwhelming flood" (Nahum 1:3) God's prophet saw before it happened.

Other elements of what was prophesied against Nineveh came to pass, too. Her network of alliances and vassal states failed in her hour of need: "Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and pass away." (Nahum 1:12). This enormous empire collapsed virtually overnight, since "The LORD has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: 'You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temples of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.'" (Nahum 1:14). What God decrees will happen, and nothing can prevent it.

God had been forbearing towards Nineveh in the past, sending Jonah to preach there with the result that "The Ninevites believed God ... declared a fast, and ... put on sackcloth." (Jonah 3:5). "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." (Jonah 3:10). But the descendants of the Ninevites who heard Jonah soon slipped back into their old habits, and now their time has run out: "Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time. They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble." (Nahum 1:9-10).

Where does this leave us?

Nahum means, comfort. The prophet brings hope at a time of great trial and hardship. "Although I have afflicted you, O Judah, I will afflict you no more. Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away." (Nahum 1:12-13). His prophecy should be a source of comfort for us, too. The destruction of a corrupt and evil regime shows God's justice and power. Fulfilment of prophecy confirms the reliability of His character and promises. Breaking the stranglehold of an oppressor makes freedom possible. Restoration brings homecoming, and a renewal of covenant blessings. We should be greatly encouraged as we read these words. At the same time, we should take to heart what they say about our own walk with the LORD.

As well as a dateable and verifiable historical reality, what Nahum describes is also timeless, part and parcel of the titanic battle between good and evil taking place in our own day. When he says, "From you, O Nineveh, has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness" (Nahum 1:11), that most probably refers to an historical character such as the Assyrian king or some other person of influence. But it pictures an archetype of villainy, as well: a human being or possibly an evil spirit that is determined to stand against God and His purposes. It's our job to resist evil. We do so by failing to tolerate it, by speaking out against it, by proclaiming the Word and works of God and by manifesting His kingdom.

God's riposte to the challenge of evil is met ultimately in Jesus. Nahum anticipates the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland: "Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, and fulfil your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed." (Nahum 1:15). The Messianic age of peace and restoration is coming soon, but in the meantime there's work for us to do. Our nation has turned away from God and is presently hurtling towards judgment. Jesus said, "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here." (Matthew 12:41).

If there's to be any hope for our land, it can only come through repenting and turning back to our Creator. The vast majority of our fellow-countrymen and -women presently have little idea about who He is and what he requires of them. As Paul noted, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14). We need to speak boldly of our God – of His power, describing the fullness of His character, and explaining what He is doing in the earth, and why. "The earth trembles at his presence" (Nahum1:5), but He "is slow to anger" (Nahum 1:3) and "is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him" (Nahum 1:7).

All praise to His holy name.

Amen