

NAHUM: THE TERRIBLE WRATH OF GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Nahum is one that is neglected because it is so obscure, and so small that it is seldom read and much less frequently understood. But every portion of scripture is indispensable, each has its own contribution to make. This is why the Apostle Paul could say, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:16,17) And this little prophecy of Nahum is no exception.

When you read this you may feel that it is a rather dry account of ancient history but actually, this prophecy reveals something of God more clearly than any other book of the Bible. It is the job of the prophet to reveal to us the character of God. The prophets unfold for us the divine attributes and each sees God in a different light. As you read through the prophets, therefore, you are seeing one facet after another, flashing like a diamond in the sunlight, of the mighty character and attributes of an eternal God.

Now the attribute which the prophet Nahum was given to reveal was God's anger. There is no doctrine quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger of God. This is one doctrine 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. Nevertheless, it was Nahum's task to unfold the anger of God and in this prophecy the God of Sinai flashes forth in awful fury, a God before whom man must stand silent and trembling. You cannot read this prophecy without sensing something of the solemnity of this tremendous picture of God.

As we begin this book it is important to know why and at whom God is so angry. this prophecy is directed against the city of Nineveh to whom God sent the prophet Jonah. When Jonah preached in Nineveh, the city repented in sackcloth and ashes. God's anger was withheld from the city and he spared it, because from the king on down to the lowest citizen, they turned to God and repented of their sins.

The book of Nahum comes some one hundred years after the prophecy of Jonah. During this time, Nineveh had repented of its repentance, and had begun to do the same things again that called forth the threat of judgment through the prophet Jonah. The prophet Nahum was sent to minister to the southern kingdom of Judah at the time of the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. King Sennacherib who came from the capital city of Syria, Nineveh, invaded Israel at the time of the prophet Isaiah, and it was from this great city in the north that the armies of the Syrians frequently came against the land of Judah and of Israel. But God moved to protect his people and met and destroyed these enemies of the king overnight.

Nahum 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.

This is one of those parts of prophecy in scripture which already has been fulfilled. Much of scripture remains to be fulfilled, and many of the predictions of the Old Testament prophets look beyond our own day to a time when the Lord will come again. But as we look at this book, we see prophecies that have long since come to pass. This is one of the great proofs that the Book of God is from God, for there is a description here of exactly how this destruction would occur, given years before it took place. Those who are interested in apologetics might use this in talking with some who challenge the fact that the Word of God is predictive.

We can divide the book of Nahum into four sections, and each of them is a description of the anger of God. I think the simplest way to describe this first section, this vision of God in his wrath, is to simply use the Anglo-Saxon word "terrible." These are beautiful poetic expressions, but they powerfully picture the wrath of God (chapter 1, verses 2-6):

**The Lord is a jealous God and avenging,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger and of great might,
and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.**

**His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.
He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
he dries up all the rivers;
Bashan and Carmel wither,
the bloom of Lebanon fades.
The mountains quake before him,
the hills melt;
the earth is laid waste before him,
the world and all that dwell therein.**

**Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and the rocks are broken asunder by him. {Nahum 1:2-6 RSV}**

What a description that is! The prophet sees God in his anger looking at the hosts of Assyria. There are some men and women who live in a perpetual temper. Their hot tempers boil over at the slightest provocation. but the interesting thing is that people do not usually fear this kind of a person. They pity them or they make jokes about them. There are other people who are more quiet and peaceful by nature. It takes a long time to stir them up. They endure irritations for a long time, but when their patience is exhausted and at last they are brought to a boil, watch out. They are terrible in anger.

That is the picture that the prophet gives here, of an infinitely patient God. As the prophet says, "He is slow to anger." He does not move rapidly. He has given this city chance after chance to repent. He has sent prophet after prophet after prophet. They did believe one prophet and repented their evil ways, and God spared the judgment he said he would bring. But they repented from their repentance. That is one of the most terrible things that men can do. Having turned from their evil, they went back to what they had said they would forsake, and this is what evokes the judgment of God at last.

God is angry, and this is no temper tantrum. There is nothing capricious about the anger of God. There is nothing selfish about it. It is a controlled but terrible rage, fearsome to behold. You can get some idea of the awfulness of this divine anger in the fact that all the Hebrew words for wrath or anger are brought together in these six verses. The words are: jealous, vengeance, wrath, anger, indignation, fierceness, fury. All of them describe the anger of God.

Jealousy, that burning zeal for a cause felt so deeply in the heart. This is not the selfish, petty jealousy we exhibit sometimes, but God's overwhelming concern for what he loves. His vengeance, or retribution; his wrath, that towering anger, the blackness of it, the darkness of it, is described here. The word for anger is the word that literally means "heavy breathing," or "hot breathing." And the word for indignation literally means "foaming at the mouth"! You can see how picturesque these words are. The word fierceness in Hebrew literally means "heat," and the word fury means "burning." And all this to describe a God who is terrible in his wrath, moved at last to the point of pouring out his wrath upon that which has awakened it. God in a white-hot passion, burning with a terrible, blistering rage.

The second section, beginning with verse 8 of chapter 1, brings before us another aspect of his anger. Here we learn that the wrath of God, or the anger of God, can be personal, for this is all directed against a single individual. In verse 11 you have reference to Sennacherib, the general of the Assyrian armies.

Did one not come out from you,

**who plotted evil against the Lord,
and counseled villainy? {Nahum 1:11 RSV}**

God's anger was all directed against this pagan king who deliberately plotted to destroy the people, after God had visited his city with grace and had saved them from his anger. Verse 12 refers to the visit of the angel of death when Sennacherib came down with his armies before Jerusalem. In Isaiah, chapters 36 and 37, you have the description of how the Assyrian armies came down and spread out before the city of Jerusalem. Then with taunting challenges to King Hezekiah, they told him they were going to take the city and that there was no strength that could stand against them. Isaiah tells us how Hezekiah took these messages and spread them before the Lord and asked God to save the city, even with the armies of Assyria surrounding it. And that night, we are told, the angel of death went through the Assyrian hosts and slew 185,000 soldiers. (Is. 37:36) That is referred to in verses 12-13:

**Thus says the Lord,
"Though they be strong and many,
they will be cut off and pass away.
Though I have afflicted you,
I will afflict you no more.
And now I will break his yoke from off you
and will burst your bonds asunder." {Nahum 1:12-13 RSV}**

As a result of this, the Assyrian armies went back and Jerusalem was saved. (There is an interesting construction there in the Hebrew. It says, "When they woke up in the morning behold they were all dead men." Of course, the ones who woke up in the morning were the Israelites and not the Assyrians.)

Verse 14 was literally fulfilled in the murder of Sennacherib. When the angel went through the camp the Assyrian general was spared, and he returned to Nineveh. But while he was worshipping his false gods in the temple after returning from this engagement with Israel, he was murdered by his own two sons, who stole the crown for themselves. We read here (verse 14):

**The Lord has given commandment about you:
"No more shall your name be perpetuated;
from the house of your gods I will cut off
the graven image and the molten image.
I will make your grave, for you are vile." {Nahum 1:14 RSV}**

Years before that happened the prophet Nahum was told that God would deal with this man in his own temple, in the house of his gods, and make his grave there. God's anger sought him out and struck him down. In verse 15 you have the joyful shout that went up from Jerusalem when the news came of Sennacherib's death:

**Behold, on the mountains the feet of him
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!
Keep you feasts, O Judah,
fulfill your vows,
for never again shall the wicked come against you,
he is utterly cut off. {Nahum 1:15 RSV}**

What a picture this is of the fact that God's wrath can be directed against a person. This is what people are so slow to believe. They say that God is a God of love. How can he possibly punish anybody? This is the argument. When it is mentioned that God's justice demands that he punish us, they say that this cannot be so. God's love is greater than his justice, they say, and therefore, under no circumstances can God's justice cause him to punish. There are many who are suffering under this delusion. But here is a man who was singled out, as the prophet tells us, to bear the brunt of the wrath of God, this man who was responsible for the depredations against Judah.

Now there is a third section, comprising all of chapter 2, which reveals still another aspect of God's anger: he is thorough. Here God is addressing Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, and he says (verse 1):

**The shatterer has come up against you.
Man the ramparts;
watch the road;
gird your loins;
collect all your strength. {Nahum 2:1 RSV}**

How dramatically this is put, as though the watchman is looking out and he sees the armies of the Babylonians coming up to destroy the city of Nineveh. History tells us that the combined armies of Cyaxares and Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, came up against Nineveh and this army is called the "Shatterer." "The Shatterer has come." Here is the way the account of the battle in the city begins (verses 3-5):

**The shield of his mighty men is red,
his soldiers are clothed in scarlet.
The chariots flash like flame
when mustered in array;
the chargers prance.
The chariots rage in the streets,
they rush to and fro through the squares;
they gleam like torches,
they dart like lightning.
The officers are summoned,
they stumble as they go,
they hasten to the wall
the mantelet is set up. {Nahum 2:3-5 RSV}**

This fourth verse sounds like it is describing the freeway: "The chariots rage in the streets, they rush to and fro through the squares; they gleam like torches, they dart like lightning." As a matter of fact, that verse has often been interpreted to be a prediction of automobiles, which is a very good example of the folly of removing a verse from its context. It has nothing to do with automobiles, although it can be made to describe them in "They gleam like torches, they dart like lightning." It is simply a predictive description of the battle that raged in the streets of Nineveh as the Babylonians came up against it.

In verse 6 you have an amazing, direct prophecy of the manner in which the city of Nineveh would be taken:

**The river gates are opened,
the palace is in dismay; {Nahum 2:6 RSV}**

The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus recorded an account of how the city of Nineveh fell, and this is what he said:

There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken till the river become an enemy with 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 [of Nineveh] thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river became an enemy of the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace and collected together all his wealth and his concubines and his eunuch, burnt himself and the palace with them all. And the enemy entered at the breach that the waters had made and took the city.

In other words, they came in through the river gates. The Babylonian armies came in through the place where the river had broken out and flooded the city and because of this mistaken idea of the king's, the Babylonians found them all gathered in the palace and there they put them to death. And this is exactly what Nahum had predicted years before.

**The river gates are opened,
the palace is in dismay. {Nahum 2:6 RSV}**

Now that is how thoroughly God's anger works when it begins to move in judgment. Nothing escapes. Remember that old saying, "Although the mills of God grind slow, they grind exceedingly small."

There is a story of the agnostic who made fun of a Christian farmer because he refused to work on his fields on Sunday. The agnostic always went out every Sunday to work in his fields, and at the end of the year he came to his Christian neighbor and taunted him. He said, "Look, you are a Christian and you don't work on Sunday, and you have had a fairly good crop, but look at the way God blessed me. I have worked every Sunday and look at the abundance of grain that I have. Why, this has been one of the richest October harvests that I have ever had." And the Christian farmer turned to him and said, "Yes, but God does not always settle his accounts in October." When God begins to move, nothing escapes his grasp, nothing. We are in his universe. We are creatures here. There is no way to run away. There is no place to hide. We must deal with a God who says over and over again that if his grace is thwarted, he will rise in judgment at the last.

Now the third section, in which God addresses the city of Nineveh. We have seen how he portrays the overthrow of the city, and now he says (verse 11-12):

**Where is the lions' den,
the cave of the young lions, {Nahum 2:13a RSV}**

[This is a picture of the Assyrian lions, the symbol of the Assyrians, just as the bear is the symbol of Russia and the lion Britain's]

**where the lion brought his prey,
where his cubs were, with none to disturb? {Nahum 2:13b RSV}**

This is a taunt at the overthrow of the city. If you had visited the site of the city of Nineveh 60 years ago you would have stood in the middle of a wilderness, never knowing that this was a site of a great and ancient city. Archaeologists have begun to unearth this city and we know now where Nineveh is located, but for centuries it was lost, buried under the shifting sands of the desert.

The last chapter reveals how irresistible the anger of God is. In verse 4 we are told one of the reasons for Nineveh's destruction:

**And all for the countless harlotries of the harlot,
graceful and of deadly charms,
who betrays nations with her harlotries,
and peoples with her charms. {Nahum 3:4 RSV}**

This is a reference to the witchcraft that was practiced in Nineveh. And in response to these practices, God says (verses 5-7):

**Behold I am against you,
says the Lord of hosts,
and will lift up your skirts over your face;
and I will let nations look on your nakedness
and kingdoms on your shame.
I will throw filth at you
and treat you with contempt,
and make you a gazingstock.
And all who look on you will shrink from you and say,
Wasted is Nineveh; who will bemoan her?
whence shall I seek comforters for her? {Nahum 3:5-7 RSV}**

And God reminds Nineveh of what had happened earlier to the Egyptian city of Thebes (verses 8-10):

**Are you better than Thebes
that sat by the Nile,
with water around her,
her rampart a sea,
and water her wall?
Ethiopia was her strength,**

**Egypt too, and that without limit;
Put and the Libyans were her helpers. {Nahum 3:8-10 RSV}**

Thebes also looked impregnable,

**Yet she was carried away,
she went into captivity;
her little ones were dashed in pieces
at the head of every street;
for her honored men lots were cast,
and all her great men were bound in chains. {Nahum 3:10 RSV}**

God controls history and when he decides to move against a nation, a city, or an individual, there is no escape. He is absolutely irresistible. In ironic language he urges the city to fortify itself (verses 14,15):

**Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your forts;
go into the clay,
tread the mortar,
take hold of the brick mold!
[Do anything you like, anything you can think of. But]
There will the fire devour you,
the sword will cut you off.
It will devour you like the locust. {Nahum 3:14-15 RSV}**

Here we see pictured the anger of God. This terrible, personal, thorough, irresistible anger. Individuals today are in danger of this anger. All through the scripture you see it. Flee from the wrath to come. Avoid the anger of God whose patience is outraged, whose grace is turned aside. The twin sins that will always call forth the wrath of God are pride and impenitence. When a nation or a person walks in pride and counts himself sufficient, saying he is able to handle his own affairs and run his own life, that nation, that person is doomed. When God shows mercy but that man or that nation remains impenitent, then comes the blazing wrath of God.

What, then, is the message of Nahum to our own hearts? Well, there is an interesting application here that is both national and individual. On the national level it is a message of comfort to us today. Just as Nahum's word brought comfort to a nation that was threatened by this godless, cruel foe, we have a somewhat similar facing us. For the interesting thing is that in the Bible the Assyrians were not only the people who were actual enemies of Israel, but they were also a type of a people yet to come who would threaten the peace of the earth and would play an important part on the stage of world history in the last days. The Assyrians in prophecy are a picture of the Soviet Union and the Communist nations, the peoples of the north. If you want an interesting study, I suggest you compare Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39, with this prophecy of Nahum. You notice in verse 13 of chapter 2 of Nahum God says,

Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, {Nahum 2:13 RSV}

And verse 5 of chapter 3,

Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts. {Nahum 3:5 RSV}

And when Ezekiel opens his great prophecy against the king of the north, the Gog of the Land of Magog as he calls him, he opens with these very words:

Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech; {Ezek 38:3 RSV}

This is the word of comfort to us that predicts God's judgment and destruction of the peoples of the north on the mountains of Israel.

Now there is an individual application as well. To those who think that God is only a God of love and never of wrath, let them learn from Nahum that a God who is never angry is a God who cannot love. Did you ever

think of that? God's wrath comes from his love. It is because God loves that he is angry; because of love that wrath must blaze forth. You can prove that to yourself. What moves you to anger? Isn't it almost always when something or someone you love is threatened or injured? It may be yourself. We all love ourselves. What makes us angry? Somebody injures us and because we love ourselves, we get mad at them. Or someone injures our child and our wrath blazes forth. And if you cannot get angry when you hear or see injury and injustice, it is proof that you are not capable of love, for the one who cannot be angry is the one who cannot love. If you can read stories of atrocities and oppression and the awful traffic in body-destroying and soul-destroying drugs and narcotics among young people and never be moved to burning anger, then I tell you there is something wrong with you. You are incapable of love. If God cannot smite, if he cannot destroy in vengeance, then he has no capacity for love.

It is certainly true that God loves the sinner but hates his sin, as we sometimes say. But that is only part of the story. The Bible tells us that if a man loves his sin and holds on to it at all costs, refusing the grace of God, then he becomes identified with his sin. And eventually, the wrath of God against his sin is also directed against the sinner.

I remember reading of a man who was convicted of stealing, but he argued before the judge that the sentence was unjust; he said it was not he who stole, it was his arm, and so it was unfair for the judge to sentence him to the penitentiary, he could only sentence his arm. Actually, he thought the judge should let him off because his arm had done the stealing and not him. The judge resolved the issue by sentencing the arm to thirty years in jail saying if the man wanted to accompany it, that was up to him.

We become identified with that to which we cling and this is what the Bible pictures. It is time to reassert that God has this capacity for anger, time again to warn men to flee from the wrath to come. Men have been saying that if you would only talk about a God of love, you could fill the churches. If only you would appeal to men about a God of love, they would turn from their wickedness and be drawn to him. But the facts prove exactly the opposite. For the last thirty years or more the message of the wrath of God has been almost totally absent in Christian pulpits. People have talked about a God of love. But that has been interpreted in the minds of men as a God of permissiveness; one who will let you do anything and get away with it. As a result, the churches are emptier than ever before and instead of turning toward God, men have defied God, refusing to believe in God and turning away from him.

You cannot just preach the God of wrath without the God of love, but the wrath of God grows out of his love, is a manifestation of his love. As Charles Spurgeon said, "He who does not believe that God will punish sin, will not believe that he will pardon it through the blood of his Son." But what is the way to escape the anger of God? Well, Nahum tells you that too, back in chapter 1, verse 7:

**The Lord is good,
a stronghold in the day of trouble;
he knows those who take refuge in him. {Nahum 1:7 RSV}**

No man who turns to God will ever experience his wrath. This complaint that God is a God of wrath seems to picture him as being vengeful without reason, as being determined upon the destruction of men, but it is never so. God only destroys, only exercises his wrath when men have rejected his love. There is a way of escape and there has been all along. We need not face the wrath of God. No one needs to. God's whole purpose has been to call men's attention to that way so that they might take it. And that way is given here: "He knows those who take refuge in him."

I remember years ago when my children were small, and one of my daughters and I had a disagreement one day and I spanked her hard. I was angry and she was crying and I did not know what to do after I spanked her as she still seemed to be unrepentant. But all of a sudden she ran and threw her arms about my neck. Now what was I to do? Continue to beat her? Oh, no! I could not have lifted a finger against her because she had taken refuge with me.

God knows those who take refuge in him and for those his heart of love is always open. They will never know his wrath. That is what the scriptures say. As the Lord Jesus put it, "He who hears my word and believes him

who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (Jn. 5:24)

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that you know them that trust in you. God grant to us the wisdom and the simple good sense to believe you and to give up an attempt to try to evade your love and your grace; to feel that somehow we can get away with it, that somehow we will escape, that somehow we will be an exception. Lord, make us to understand that the very persistence and unchangeability that guarantees we will never escape is the same persistence that prompts your grace and reminds us that he who turns to you shall never come into judgment but has passed from death into life. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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