

Old Testament Overview

Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

This afternoon, we will continue our study of the prophetic books

We have discussed the six (6) of the twelve (12) minor prophets

- Hosea, Joel, Amos,
- Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah

We will look at three more this afternoon

- Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah

Let's pray and get started¹

Nahum

It is very easy for us to forget

- We have a tendency to forget important details, dates, or events
- But we also have a tendency to forget spiritual matters as well

Nineveh had been spared from God's wrath

- The book of Jonah chronicled this

Do you remember why Jonah didn't want to proclaim God's message to this great city"

- "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2)
- The prophet knew that God would be gracious in dealing with these pagan Gentiles

But God allowed these Assyrians to be given repentance

- Amazing, isn't it?

What is even more amazing is to fast-forward the tape of history about 100 years

- We would expect Nineveh to be following the LORD faithfully
- We would expect Nineveh to have learned its lesson

¹ This lesson references material from Capitol Hill Baptist Church's core seminar on the Old Testament. <http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/class-1-introduction-to-the-old-testament/>

But that is not the case

- Just a little over a century after God's great working in their lives, they forgot the lesson
- You might say that the city of Nineveh repented of their repentance
- Their reforms were short-lived

That is where the minor prophet Nahum comes into focus

- He is the man who will relay God's Word to the city of Nineveh
- This is the second prophet who was sent to this city²

Very little is known about the man Nahum

- He is referred to as "Nahum the Elkoshite" (1:1)
- We don't even know exactly where Elkosh is!

We do know that Nahum's name means "comfort" or "consolation"³

- This book was designed to provide comfort for Judah
- But Nineveh would not be comforted

Much of what will be discussed about Nineveh we covered in the book of Jonah

- Let's do a quick review

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria

- At the time of Nahum's prophecy, they were the world's greatest power
- They were at their zenith and apex of military might⁴

This short prophecy breaks down into three divisions, each based on the three chapters⁵

- The certainty of Nineveh's destruction (chapter 1)
- The description of Nineveh's destruction (chapter 2)
- The reasons for Nineveh's destruction (chapter 3)

I. The certainty of Nineveh's destruction (chapter 1)

Just a little over a century earlier, Nineveh had enjoyed the grace of God

- They deserved judgment
- But God showed grace and compassion

But over that short period of time, the city had chosen to return to their sinfulness

- They had chosen sin over obedience to the LORD

² Dr. Alan B. Stringfellow, *Through the Bible in One Year*, 101.

³ Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible*, 267.

⁴ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 816.

⁵ Stringfellow, 101. I modified his outline; however, I wanted to give credit where credit was due.

In the opening section of chapter 1, the prophet describes the character of God

- Why do you think he dealt with the character of God in a book that deals with the destruction of Nineveh?

God's character is set against the sinfulness of Nineveh

- They had disobeyed and rebelled against God

Look at Nahum 1:2-7, "A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies. **3** The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet. **4** He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; the blossoms of Lebanon wither. **5** Mountains quake because of Him and the hills dissolve; indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, the world and all the inhabitants in it. **6** Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire and the rocks are broken up by Him. **7** The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him." (1:2-7)

- What a tremendous revelation of God's character and nature!

What did God want to reveal about Himself to the Assyrians?

- 1:2
 - o Jealous
 - o Avenging (3x)
 - o Wrathful (2x)
 - o Vengeance
- 1:3
 - o Slow to anger
 - o Great in power
 - o Won't leave the guilty unpunished
 - o Sovereign over nature
- 1:4
 - o Sovereign over nature
- 1:5
 - o Sovereign over nature
- 1:6
 - o Unequaled and unparalleled among the gods

In strong contrast, God is revealed to be the following to Judah in 1:7

- Good
- A stronghold in the day of trouble
- A refuge for those who know Him

God had revealed Himself to Nineveh 100 years prior

- He was a compassionate God – displaying mercy instead of judgment
- He was a sovereign God – guiding His prophet despite his own desire to run
- He was a longsuffering God – He didn't execute His wrath at the first breach of sin

But notice that there is no mercy extended to Nineveh in the book of Nahum

- God's decision is final
- They are not given the opportunity to repent since God is the One who grants repentance

Let's look at 1:8-10, “**But with an overflowing flood He will make a complete end of its site, and will pursue His enemies into darkness. ⁹ Whatever you devise against the LORD, He will make a complete end of it. Distress will not rise up twice. ¹⁰ Like tangled thorns, and like those who are drunken with their drink, they are consumed as stubble completely withered.**”

- This accurately describes the downfall and destruction of Nineveh
- We have historical records that show just how God kept His Word

The city of Nineveh seemed to be undefeatable⁶

- The walls were 100 feet high
- The walls were wide enough for three chariots to ride across at the same time
- Along these walls were high towers that were used as lookout posts
- Surrounding the walls was a huge moat with 150 feet wide and 60 feet deep
- In addition to this, the city had built up a supply of food and resources that would have lasted them 20 years

When Nahum prophesied of the defeat of Nineveh, I am sure that it seemed to be nonsense

- After all, he was talking about the mighty capital of the Assyrian Empire!

Nahum 1:8 records these words, “**But with an overwhelming flood He will make a complete end of its site**”

This great city of Nineveh fell when God caused the Tigris River to flood⁷

- This mighty torrent of rushing water caused the floodgates of the city to be swept away
- The foundations of the city were damaged

⁶ Wilkinson & Boa, 268.

⁷ Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 190-91.

At this appropriate time, the Babylonian army seized the moment and stormed the city

- They entered through the damaged floodgates
- They defeated the inhabitants of the city
- Then they burned the city

The city was destroyed to such an extent that the city was not discovered until A.D. 1842

- Almost 2500 years after the destruction of Nineveh⁸

II. The description of Nineveh's destruction (chapter 2)

This chapter opens up with a description of an attack

- The language used in this chapter is very graphic and descriptive
- War is coming upon the city of Nineveh
- And there is nothing they can do to thwart God's plan

Let's read Nahum 2:1-7, "The one who scatters has come up against you. Man the fortress, watch the road; strengthen your back, summon all *your* strength. ² For the LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, even though devastators have devastated them and destroyed their vine branches. ³ The shields of his mighty men are *colored* red, the warriors are dressed in scarlet, the chariots are *enveloped* in flashing steel when he is prepared *to march*, and the *cypress spears* are brandished. ⁴ The chariots race madly in the streets, they rush wildly in the squares, their appearance is like torches, they dash to and fro like lightning flashes. ⁵ He remembers his nobles; they stumble in their march, they hurry to her wall, and the mantelet is set up. ⁶ The gates of the rivers are opened, and the palace is dissolved. ⁷ It is fixed: she is stripped, she is carried away, and her handmaids are moaning like the sound of doves, beating on their breasts."

This is full of war images

- People running
- Blood spilled
- Warriors injured
- Chariots racing through the city
- Gates are opened
- Swords clashing
- A victor crowned
- The loser humiliated

Nahum 2:6 says, "The gates of the rivers are opened, and the palace is dissolved"

- That is exactly what happened during the siege of Nineveh
- The gates were opened by the flood of the Tigris River!
- Exactly as God had promised

⁸ Wilkinson & Boa, 268.

Nahum 2:13 is sobering, “Behold, I am against you,’ declares the LORD of hosts. ‘I will burn up her chariots in smoke, a sword will devour your young lions, I will cut off your prey from the land, and no longer will the voice of your messengers be heard”

- “Behold, I am against you”
- Could any more devastating words be spoken?

Imagine what it would be like for the Almighty God to speak these words to you, “Behold, I am against you”

- The One who controls nature
- The One who controls heaven and hell
- The One who controls time
- The One who has absolute and ultimate authority

God was informing Assyria that her time had run out⁹

- The nation thought that it was invincible
- But God would bring it down rather easily

III. The reasons for Nineveh’s destruction (chapter 3)

Why is God allowing judgment to fall upon this city?

- In short, because of Nineveh’s sins

Nahum 3:4 says, “All because of the many harlotries of the harlot, the charming one, the mistress of sorceries, who sells nations by her harlotries and families by her sorceries”

- This is the language of sinfulness, immorality, and unfaithfulness

In 3:8-10, the fall of Thebes is recounted

- Some of your versions may have “No-Amon”
- They refer to the same place

Thebes was the great capital of Upper Egypt¹⁰

- It was located on the Nile River

Nahum seems to have the defeat of Thebes fresh in his mind as he writes this third chapter

- The defeat of Thebes took place around 664 B.C.¹¹

About a decade after the defeat of Thebes, the city was rebuilt

- But nothing is mentioned about that in the book of Nahum

⁹ Dever, 823.

¹⁰ Feinberg, 199-200.

¹¹ Wilkinson & Boa, 267.

This great city of Nineveh fell in 612 B.C.¹²

- So the book of Nahum seems to be written after 664 B.C. and before 612 B.C.

We also know that the Assyrians had routed Israel in 722 B.C.

- They took Israel captive

It was 30-50 years after the repentance at the preaching of Jonah that the Assyrians ransacked Israel

- Now a little over 100 years after the destruction of Israel, the Assyrians were overthrown by the Babylonians

The destruction of Nineveh was so extensive that it became virtually unknown and forgotten for 2400 years

- Such a world power as this would be judged by God and rendered all but forgotten

Nahum's name implies "comfort" or "consolation"

- How can this message be comforting?

It definitely wasn't intended to be comforting for Nineveh

- As Gentiles, they were not part of God's covenant family
- They had been shown grace; however, they reverted back to their previous ways

Their sins after their repentance were greater than their sins before their repentance¹³

- After being shown God's grace, the Ninevites rebelled against the God of grace and mercy

No longer could they cite ignorance of who God was

- He had displayed His mercy and compassion
- But they chose to rebel anyway

It would have been comforting for Judah to realize that the incessant attacks of the unrighteous would be punished

- All around them, the ungodly were flourishing in power, finances, and resources
- However, those would not last forever

One day in the near future, God will come and avenge the wrongs done to His people

- "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. ²⁰ But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is

¹² Ibid., 267.

¹³ Gerard Chrispin, *The Bible Panorama*, 379.

thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:17-21)

For years, the Assyrians had been feared by many nations

- People were terrified of this nation that was ruthless over its defeated foes

But the message of Nahum reminds Judah that God is much bigger and stronger than the Assyrians

- He is the Sovereign, Almighty God
- He is the One who establishes kings
- He is the One who allows nations to rise and fall

We might say that God has a twofold message for Nineveh through Jonah and Nahum¹⁴

- In Jonah we see the goodness of God
- In Nahum we see the severity of God

The following chart helps to compare and contrast the book of Jonah and Nahum¹⁵

Jonah	Nahum
The mercy of God	The judgment of God
760 B.C.	ca. 660 B.C.
Repentance of Nineveh	Rebellion of Nineveh
Emphasis on prophet	Emphasis on prophecy
Disobedient prophet	Obedient prophet
Obedient nation	Disobedient nation
Deliverance from water	Destruction by water

In a very strong manner, Nineveh would have been taught these two principles

- Yes, they had been shown the goodness of God
- However, God had other characteristics than just His goodness

In the opening chapter, Nahum described God’s character, “A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies. ³ The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished” (1:2-3a)

- God is good
- But God is also avenging and wrathful
- He will not allow sin to go unpunished

¹⁴ Stringfellow, 101.

¹⁵ Wilkinson & Boa, 269.

This reminds me of what Paul wrote to the church of Rome, “Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom 11:22)

Hearing this message about God’s dealings with Israel prompts a dual response

- Thank God for His kindness and mercy
- Fear God because of His severity

What does God intend for us to learn from this ancient book?

- We are not Judah
- We are not Nineveh

The reality is that we can learn from both of these examples

- Nineveh needed to learn God’s entire revelation of Himself
- Not just that He was merciful; He was also a God of wrath and vengeance

Judah needed to realize that her trust was in the LORD

- He was the Sovereign God who was Almighty in power and might

As Christians, we can learn some similar lessons

- We are not in control of our lives
- God is!

Like Judah, we can learn to trust God even when it seems that life is out of control

- Even when it seems that pagan nations (or individuals) are increasing in strength

We also can learn from this book that repentance is not a one-time act

- We can’t rely on past spiritual events to carry and sustain us into the future

Repentance should be a regular, repeated act in our lives

- As God makes us aware of sins, we need to repent
- As God teaches us His Word, we need to repent of wrong ideas about His character

God revealed Himself to be jealous in 1:2

- “for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex 34:14)
- God’s very name is Jealous!

God wants our loyalty and obedience

Any questions or comments?