

The Prophecy Of Nahum (Chapter 1)

Nahum himself: Nahum is probably a book you know little or nothing about! In fact, nobody knows anything about Nahum himself except what is written in this book. Some people think that the town that he lived in (Elkos, verse 1) was later known as Capernaum (which means, “the city of Nahum”) - i.e. The city that the Lord Jesus lived in (Matthew 4:13).

The book of Nahum: The book of Nahum is really very simple. It is a prophecy of certain and terrible judgment upon Nineveh, the capital of the wicked Assyrian empire. Founded centuries earlier by Nimrod (Genesis 10:9-11), the prophet Jonah had preached to these people about 150 years earlier. Then, they had repented and turned to the Lord, who had spared them. Since then, though, they had returned to great extremes of wickedness and idolatry.

The times of the prophecy: This prophecy takes place, like all the prophets, after the nation of Jews had been divided into two – the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern (Judah). In fact, by this time the northern kingdom had been destroyed by the Assyrians, in 726BC. It is not yet the time when the southern kingdom has gone into exile in Babylon. Assyria is the real super-power in the world at this time until Babylon defeated it as prophesied in this book. Judah had been severely threatened by Assyria who had come to lay siege to Jerusalem – but at that time the Lord saved them by killing 185,000 of the Assyrian army, which had to return to Nineveh in defeat. You can read about all of this in 2 Kings 18-19.

Nineveh: Nineveh itself was an awesome city. Its walls were over 100 feet high and wide enough for 3 chariots to drive along side by side. It required 3 days to tour (Jonah 3:3) and had 1500 towers. It was surrounded by a moat that was 165 feet wide and 65 feet deep. The rulers of Assyria prided themselves that, inside it, they were invincible. But, as prophesied in Nahum 1:8, this watery defence became Assyria's downfall. In 612BC a massive flood opened up part of the city wall, allowing the Medes and Babylonians to ride in, set the city on fire and end the power of the Assyrian empire.

The prophecy of Nahum: The prophecy itself is a very terrible one. There is no hope for Assyria. Jonah's preaching brought grace to the city, but they afterwards rejected the goodness of God. As those who had known the way of righteousness but turned their backs on it, their sin was great and obvious. They were ripe for judgment. The book of Nahum is the announcement of their total doom. The city of Nineveh was destroyed so thoroughly that nobody knew where it had been situated again until the site was rediscovered in the year 1842.

Three Themes From Nahum Chapter 1

1. The Character And Power Of God (verses 2-6)

The judgment Nahum will announce is based upon the character of God. This terrible anger will be poured out because he is an awesome and holy God. He is personally affronted by sin and has determined to judge it. He does not lack any power to carry out these judgments. Whatever great things you can see in creation, they are nothing to God – he has complete control and authority over them all. There is no hope for anyone who has to face this awesome anger.

Verses like these encourage us to think rightly about God. When Christian churches deteriorate, they usually start to think of God in a very one-sided way. They talk about his love and grace, but stop seeing that love and grace biblically. They do not understand them in relation to God's perfect justice and holy anger at sin. The death of our Lord Jesus is such a wonderful gift of love precisely because of the terrible judgment he took on our behalf. The gospel only makes sense because we

know how little sympathy God has with our evil deeds. The cross of Christ is the proof of the dreadful punishment that awaits the wicked – because if God did not even spare his own Son when our sins were counted as his, he will certainly not spare any of us.

2. Certain And Devastating Judgment For Nineveh (v8-14)

The earlier verses in the chapter emphasise *why* judgment is certain: God's character and power. These verses emphasise the judgment itself. Nahum prophesied that when it came it would be sudden and final – it would not come in stages, or with warnings, pauses and opportunities to repent (v8-9). Nineveh had gone too far for that. The end would come when it seemed that nobody could touch them, when they were not expecting it, and very quickly (verse 10), like the burning of dry stubble.

God's word was fulfilled in 612BC. A huge flood broke down part of the city's defences whilst the Assyrians were rejoicing in their safety, and when word of this came to the Babylonians they swiftly took their opportunity. God has at his hand an infinite number of ways in which to bring down the proud when he pleases. There is no safe place we can build up in this world in rebellion against him, no defence which we can use to keep him out. These verses should encourage us to be urgent and sincere in pleading with the ungodly to repent and turn to Christ. They also remind us what a terrible price our Saviour had to pay in order to purchase us from our sins (Psalm 49:6-9). They remind us too that one day he is returning, suddenly and decisively, and that many people will not be ready (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3).

3. Comfort (And Challenge) For The Faithful People Of God (v7, 12b, 15)

In a way, the whole book is comfort for God's suffering people. It tells them that though the wicked may be very powerful, very proud and seem always to be successful, yet their final doom is certain. God himself will see to it. Whoever is causing God's people to sorrow shall one day receive their just reward.

There are, though, particular words of encouragement included in this chapter. The prophets often did this. So that nobody should despair at the terrible judgments which they announced, they included words to encourage the godly. Even when announcing his jealousy, God reminded that he was slow to anger (verse 3). His “fury will be poured out like fire” (verse 6), but the righteous need not be afraid. When trouble comes, he will take special care of those who trust him. His goodness will not allow him to forget them, and they will be quite safe (verse 7).

The words at the end of verse 12 refer to the fact that Judah, God's people, had been caused to suffer under the power of Assyria. This had been a discipline to them. When God disciplines his children, though, it is not to destroy them but to purify and train them (Hebrews 12:5-11). It is not for ever, but so that we might be worthy to inherit what he has for us in Christ.

The words of verse 15 are also in Isaiah 52:7, and the apostle Paul refers to those or both in Romans 10:15. The people of God are encouraged to rejoice, because the good news of liberty will come and be proclaimed. This finds its ultimate fulfilment in Christ, because it is only through him that the true enemies who have kept us enslaved, sin, the devil and death, are defeated and it is the gospel of Christ which comes to the world to announce this joyful liberation.

The chapter finishes with a challenge. The overthrow of our and God's enemies is not a reason for us to become lazy or fall into sin ourselves. It is a challenge to us to faithfulness. We should not use our peace and liberty as a cover for wrongdoing (Galatians 5:13); we should use the opportunity to be careful to serve the Lord with all our hearts.