

Nahum – Comfort, Jealousy and Judgement

Nahum 1:1-8, 1:15-2:2

A teenage pedestrian did not notice an oncoming truck as he crossed a busy boulevard in New York City. Just before the young man darted in front of the speeding vehicle, a strong hand grabbed his shirt and pulled him back safely to the curb. Red with fear & adrenaline, the teen thanked the elderly man for saving him. Several weeks later the same teenager was in court to stand trial for stealing a car. When the boy looked up at the judge, he recognized him. "Hey, you're that man who saved me a few weeks back when the truck was coming," exclaimed the young man. "Surely you can do something now!"

"Sorry, son," replied the magistrate. "On that day I was your savior. Today I am your judge!"

It's important to mention that based on various ancient scrolls that have been found, parts of the Bible have come to us with incredible accuracy. From the Hebrew scroll of the Minor Prophets, and fragments of a Greek text of the Minor Prophets, what we read today, has few variations. The text of Nahum is especially well preserved.

The book of Nahum contains the prophecy of Nahum. This book is one of the 12 Minor Prophets. It comes in chronological order between the books Micah and Habakkuk in the Bible's Old Testament. It begins with these 2 sentences. "An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite." The term oracle in the Bible means, the word of God given by a servant of God.

The meaning of the name Nahum means "comfort" and is related to the name Nehemiah, meaning "The Lord comforts" or "comfort of the Lord." Nothing is known about Nahum, except maybe his hometown was Elkosh. But its general location is uncertain.

The tomb of Nahum is supposedly inside the synagogue at Alqosh in northern Iraq, 50 miles from Mosul. If this is true, Nahum could be a

descendent of people taken into exile in 722 BC. Jews lived there until 1948 when they were expelled. But there are other places outside Iraq which also lay claim to being the original "Elkosh" from which Nahum is said to have come. One of those is in Galilee and another in the West Bank.

At this point it's good to remind ourselves that God's world wide church is bigger than Protestant and Catholic religions. The Prophet Nahum is venerated as a saint in Eastern Christianity. And Nahum is commemorated with the other minor prophets in the calendar of saints of the Armenian Apostolic Church on July 31.

Most scholars agree that Nahum uttered this oracle between 663 and 612 before Jesus, perhaps near the end of this period. This would place him during the reign of Josiah and make him a contemporary of the prophets Zephaniah and the young Jeremiah. But other scholars say he preached during the reign of Manasseh, one of, if not the most evil king of Judah. If this is true, that means Nahum preached during the darkest period in Judah's history to that point, a time filled with idolatry of all kinds in a nation that had completely turned its back on God. So the message of comfort was tied to warning.

But how in the world can Nahum live up to his name? How can he be a comforter? Well, it depends on how we look at judgment. If it is a judgment upon your enemy, Assyria, one of whom you are afraid of, one who dominates you, then judgment can be a comfort to you. So the Lord's willingness to send Nahum, whose name means "comfort," into such a hopeless situation as Judah was in, is evidence of our Creator's unrelenting and overwhelming grace.

If you remember your Bible history, Jonah had announced Nineveh's and Assyria's destruction earlier. The book of Jonah was God's direct message to the enemy, Nineveh to repent or be destroyed. And they repented. Frankly, there has never been anything quite like it in the history of the world. We simply do not seem to have anything else that could compare to an

entire city, 100 percent, maybe the entire nation of Assyria, turning to God.

But within 100 to 150 years, Nineveh reverted to its extreme wickedness, cruelty and pride. They ignored that God's justice is always right and always sure. Should the Almighty choose to grant mercy for a time, that good gift will not compromise the Lord's ultimate sense of justice for all in the end. So it makes sense that the book of Nahum was a comfort to the people of Judah. Maybe this message reached some Assyrians, but judgement was coming.

Nahum is like a sequel, with an announcement of doom and judgement on Israel's enemies but we don't think Nahum went to Nineveh. So this message is for Judah, that God is just.

We live in a time when we like to think of God as forgiving and gracious. It's hard to accept messages like Nahum has – even on our own enemies. The message of judgment is often one we would rather not discuss. Our belief system would rather exclude punishment for wrong when it concerns our own sins. We are not a people prone to accountability or, worse, retribution. We would rather not believe that there are consequences for our actions. We think we can go on our way avoiding any reprisal for wrong. But we know differently.

We tend to think of jealousy as a negative emotion. So why is God jealous? Jealousy involves envy and self absorption. So think of judgement and jealousy this way.

Let's say you come home one day to find a stranger in your living room talking to your teenage daughter. He informs you that he has been chatting with your daughter online and says that he and your fourteen year-old are madly in love. He looks to be about forty. He says that he and your daughter have agreed that they should elope to a country that permits girls her age to marry without the consent of parents and that he is there to pick her up.

Now assuming that you would be able to restrain yourself long enough to assess what you are

feeling, what you would find is that you have become jealous for your daughter – jealous for the affection that rightfully belongs to you, jealous for her safety and happiness which rightfully belong to her, jealous that she have a chance to mature enough to make good choices. And you would act swiftly, and by the grace of God legally, to remove this stranger from your daughter's life and to help her recalibrate her sense of proper relationships, affections and decision making.

It is in this sense that God is jealous – he is jealous for his people, for their affection which rightly belongs to him and for their well-being and growth, which rightly belongs to them. It is for this reason that he chastises us when we begin seeking other gods, for not only is it an offense to him who has been faithful and true, but God also knows that the paths his children will walk under the influence of his rivals will lead to our destruction. That is what sin does.

This is why God honors his people's trust in him by bringing judgment on those that oppress them. As he promised to Abraham, 'I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you.' Nahum was making the point that since God judges those temporarily employed by him as instruments on His unfaithful people, how much more fearful the judgment upon his own people will be.

So if not envy, or being self absorbed, then what is this kind of jealousy rooted in? It is rooted in love. Wanting the best for us. "God is love." Love for his people. Longing for their wholeness. Love for his creation and his efforts to bring it to full redemption, restoration and shalom. Also it's love for his name and glory for which we were created to praise.

Nahum begins his oracle with a clear focus on Nineveh, which is common code for the violent and brutal nation Assyria. He pronounces certain doom. "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; The Lord takes vengeance & is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes, maintains his wrath against his enemies."

And then we have one of the favorite verses in the Bible. “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power.” But the end of that verse is: “The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished.” In our rightful emphasis on grace, we need to be careful we don’t leave out the whole message.

Nahum did not write this book as a warning or “call to repentance” for the people of Nineveh. Nahum was telling the people of Judah to not despair because God had pronounced judgment and the Assyrians would soon be getting just what they deserved. So we have this theme of judgement toward Nineveh, which would bring comfort to the people of Judah to whom the book of Nahum is directed.

To help us understand the book of Nahum, God’s jealousy and judgement, here is an example that is closer to our time that helps us gain perspective. When Romania was still under communist rule, a Christian pastor from that country commented on Revelation, the favorite book of the Bible for his people. They loved Revelation because, it was written by John, pastor of the church in Ephesus, when he was exiled. Romanian Christians knew what it is to be exiled and imprisoned. They suffered as the early Christians and Judah suffered. So they read Revelation and heard the clear message: God is God, and he judges the good and the bad. He is personally committed to seeing that evil does not triumph.

This, said the Romanian pastor, is very different from how North American Christians look at Revelation. We are fascinated with historical details, trying to work out precise future plans and speculations. We wonder about rapture, and hope we will never suffer. But Romanians, suffered, and in suffering they heard God speak to them through Revelations.

The way the Romanians looked at Revelation is how the Jews heard Nahum. It was a message of comfort in the midst of their suffering, a word of hope in a dark time of evil, a message that all is not lost. God maintains final control.

One of the losses of translation is we miss out on the full mood and poetry of Nahum. The contents are primarily made up of judgment oracles, with appropriate descriptions and vocabulary, expressing intense moods, sights and sounds. The language is poetic, with frequent use of metaphors and similes, vivid word pictures, repetition and many short -- often staccato – phrases. It might help to read this book out loud and listen to the poetry.

Not one of the Minor Prophets seems to equal the vehemence and boldness of Nahum. His words are colorful, clear and direct. We see a powerful moral indignation toward injustice and oppression. It seems Nahum is somewhat a nationalist – mad about how Israel was treated by Assyria.

I came across a comment that caused me to look at Nahum from another angle. Rev. John Owen who was a translator of Calvin's Commentary on Jonah & Micah, wrote, “Nahum it is one of the world’s classic rebukes of militarism.... All tyrants are doomed. They make enemies of those whom they attack and oppress; they become corrupt, dissolute, drunken; they are lulled into false security...” I can think of more than one government today that should pay attention to this observation.

I hope we can see that the intent was to provide comfort for the people of Judah. Implicit, unsaid in what Nahum says, is the warning that God also does not play favorites. Israel and Judah deserved judgment for their spiritual infidelity, as did the Assyrians.

From a Biblical perspective, Nahum is not the norm. Jesus is. At the same time, we have to deal with many stories of God pronouncing and then carrying out vengeance. Being a jealous God. As loving as Jesus is, when we read the Gospels – he doesn’t condone sin and idolatry.

Another illustration comes from 1897, when the British Empire was at the height of its power, the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria was observed. Rudyard Kipling, the great writer was the obvious man to write a poem of

celebration. After days of futility in desperation he composed a poem that baffled and angered many English citizens who were in the mood to celebrate England's power and wealth.

Here is what he wrote:

Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

Today it seems democracy is being taken over by big business and corruption. Governments around the world are failing the common citizen. We see acts of anger and hatred every day on the news. And we see immense natural and political disasters. Tyrants are gaining power, but hopefully we can still believe that God is in control. Nahum lived in a dark time, a time in which the faithful few must have wondered how long they would have to resist cultural and spiritual compromise. How long would they have to fear Nineveh.

The focal point of the entire book is the Lord's judgment on Nineveh for her oppression, cruelty, idolatry and wickedness. The book ends with the destruction of the city.

While the book as a whole clearly shows God's concern over sin, His willingness to punish those guilty of wickedness, and His power to carry out His desire for judgment, it also contains rays of hope shining through the darkness. Most significant, the people of Judah would have immediately taken hope in the idea that Nineveh, their primary oppressor for generations, would soon come under judgment from God.

Also, a small but faithful remnant in an increasingly idolatrous Judah would have been comforted by declarations of God's slowness to anger. His goodness and strength, and His restorative power.

So we have this tension like Romans 11:22 says, "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his

kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off." God is not only kind but also stern.

In Nahum, God is not only "slow to anger" and "a refuge . . . for those who trust in him." But our Creator is also one who "will not leave the guilty unpunished." God's righteous and just kingdom will ultimately triumph, for kingdoms built on tyranny & wickedness must eventually fall, as Assyria did. Nahum declares the universal sovereignty of God. God is Lord of history and of all nations; as such, he controls everyone's destinies.

It does us good to be reminded that God is still God. Our Creator has the final word on pain, injustice, abuse, and unfairness. When we think evil and wicked people win, while good and decent people are punished, it is best to not complete the scorecard until the final whistle blows. The devil wins to many battles, but it's Almighty God who wins the war. At that point God will make the correct judgment call. The wicked will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded. God's justice does reign. That knowledge should give us comfort.