

NAHUM: Understanding God's Judgment

Sunday, July 7, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Nahum 1:1-9

A sequel is the continuation of a story. Books have sequels. Movies have sequels. Even the Bible has a sequel: the prophecy of Nahum provides a sequel to the book of Jonah. Remember that God called Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the superpower of the age and the sworn enemy of Israel. Nineveh was a wicked city, a city notorious for its godless tyranny. Nineveh had a reputation for extreme cruelty: when Assyrian armies captured a city or a country, the soldiers would perform unspeakable atrocities. Nations everywhere feared and hated the Assyrians.

Jonah preached God's message of repentance to Nineveh. Jonah warned that if they did not give up their evil ways God would crush them. Surprisingly, and much to Jonah's annoyance, the Ninevites repented, turned to God, and God spared Nineveh from judgment.

Then some 100 to 150 years passed. Generations came and went. New kings ascended Assyria's throne. The Ninevites forgot about Jonah's warning and about God's mercy. They returned to their wicked ways. They repented of their repentance. They turned around on their turnaround. Their cruelty increased. They once again sought to capture, torture, and enslave other nations. When Assyria attacked Israel and lay siege to Jerusalem (701 BC), God sent the prophet Nahum with a new message of judgment against Nineveh.

I. The Man: Judgment for one can mean comfort to others. The book begins: "*The oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite*" (1:1). Nahum's name means "comfort," which is appropriate because his message of the coming judgment against Nineveh comforted Judah after their suffering at Assyria's hand.

Taking comfort during difficult times is a tough concept for us because we live relatively easy lives with certain rights and protections. This is not the case for everyone. For many years, Romania languished under Communist rule. A Christian pastor noted that during those years the Romanian people looked to the book of Revelation because it spoke words of comfort in difficult times. John wrote Revelation when he was in exile. Romanian

Christians knew what it meant to be exiled and imprisoned. They suffered as the early Christians suffered. The Romanian people heard a clear message in Revelation: God is God, and God judges the good and the bad. God is personally committed to seeing that evil does not triumph. The Romanian people, the pastor said, suffer, and in that suffering they hear God speak.

The way the Romanian people heard Revelation is how the Jews heard Nahum. It was a message of comfort amid their suffering, a word of hope in a dark time of evil, a message that all is not lost. God is in control and God will triumph. It is good for us to be reminded that God is still God and that God will have the final word over pain, injustice, and violence. 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. At that point, God will make the correct judgment call. The wicked will be punished, and the righteous will be rewarded. That knowledge should bring us some measure of comfort.

II. The Message: God's power will punish wrong. When Nineveh returned to their wicked ways, Nahum spoke this message of judgment on Nineveh. "*Beware, I am against you. This is the declaration of the LORD of Hosts. I will make your chariots go up in smoke and the sword will devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the sound of your messengers will never be heard again*" (2:13). These are some of the most chilling words in the entire Bible: "Beware, I am against you!" Who would want God against them? What a terrifying prospect! It's one thing to be left wandering around and on your own, but having the God of Creation, the Lord of Heaven's armies, actively opposing you is something entirely different. If God is against us, what does it matter who is for us?

The phrase "Lord of hosts" refers to the power of God; it is often used in the Old Testament in a military context. "Chariots," "lions," "prey," and "messengers" refer to the strength of the Assyrians. Nahum prophesies that The Lord will reduce Nineveh's strength to nothing: Nineveh's chariots will be burned, the sword will devour its soldiers, no prey will be brought back to Nineveh, and the voice of its messengers will be stilled. God will have the final word. God will defeat, destroy, and annihilate Assyria.

The prophet Isaiah records the story of Assyria's defeat (Isaiah 36-37). When the Assyrian army besieged Jerusalem, the Lord's angel came in the night and killed 185,000 soldiers. The remaining soldiers fled. Soon thereafter, as Assyrian King Sennacherib prayed in the temple of his idol god, his own sons murdered him. Then the Babylonian army invaded

Assyria and destroyed Nineveh. Nahum offered an insight into how the defeat would take place: "*The river gates are opened; the palace melts away*" (2:6).

According to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, Babylon laid siege to Nineveh. In the third year of the siege there were extraordinarily heavy rains. The river overflowed, flooded the city, and collapsed a large section of the wall. The king of Nineveh figured that all was lost, so he set fire to the palace, killing everyone. The Babylonians took the city, coming through the river gates to discover the palace in flames. Nahum's prophesy of judgment came true.

The message of judgment is often one we would rather not discuss. We'd much rather believe that God's punishment for sin is directed at someone else. We are not a people inclined to take responsibility for or accept judgment on our actions. We prefer to believe that there are no consequences for our sins. We think we can go on our way avoiding any reprisal for wrong. Nahum tells a different story.

III. The Meaning: The God of love is also the God of judgment. The idea of judgment does not fit with the picture we want of a loving God. We are hard pressed to envision a God of judgment. Somehow that idea does not mesh with the goodness of God. But the fact is that God brings judgment as a part of God's goodness. Think about it: How could a good God allow evil to exist? One commentator wrote, "[God's] judgment is an inevitable expression of [God's] goodness on behalf of the victims of evil."

God is not amoral. God is loving but also just. God executes God's judgment out of God's deep love for humanity. God does not judge because of the deep satisfaction it brings God to cause pain or suffering. God delivers judgment to correct bad behavior and to stop evil from spreading. A God who sits idly by and never deals with sin should give us cause for concern. Thankfully, in loving-justice, God will powerfully pass judgment over God's creation.

IV. The meaning: The God of salvation is also the God of judgment. Many Christians are uncomfortable with God's role as the Judge. They prefer the Savior meek and mild. They want love and forgiveness without the accountability and judgment. But the Bible shows us that Jesus, the One who was slain for our sins, will be the One executing judgment over our sin. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is the only One qualified to be both Savior and Judge. God must be both Savior and Judge to be fully effective.

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 and adrenaline, the teen thanked the older man for saving him. Several weeks later the same teenager stood in court on 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!" In the same way, God is both our Savior and our Judge.

God gives all people the opportunity to repent and experience the benefit of salvation. The Ninevites had that opportunity when Jonah preached his message of repentance. We have that opportunity everyday thanks to the Christ's death and resurrection. In fact, Jesus longs for all people to come to repentance. Jesus even offers to be our advocate before God. But when we stand before God, the Judge, the opportunity to repent is gone. At that time judgment will be carried out. We must personally accept the invitation to come to the God of salvation now, because when we stand before the God of judgment it will be too late.

As we gather at the communion table today, we remember how Jesus took the wrath we deserve so that we could be spared. Jesus took God's judgment on the cross. All our wicked and vile sins were nailed there with Him. He alone is our Savior. Nahum's words to Nineveh serve as a warning for us, driving us to the cross of Jesus. For there we see God's perfect combination of love and justice. God poured out God's wrath against sin on Jesus. God's love is evidenced in Jesus' willingness to die for our sins, receiving the punishment so that we could be set free. All we need to do is to go to Jesus, repenting of our sins, trusting in his free gift of salvation fully and forever. God's judgment will come, as it did to Nineveh, but because of Jesus, we need not fear God's wrath, just accept God's grace.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for Your written Word and the truth that it contains. Thank You that You are a righteous and holy God, who punishes evil and avenges the righteous. Thank You that You jealously care for Your people, and that the day is coming when righteousness and peace will flood the earth, when Christ returns to set up His earthly kingdom. Thank You in Jesus' name, AMEN.

Source: Rick Ezell, "" www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-understanding-gods-judgment-nahum. Site visited May 9, 2019.