

NAHUM

Part 2: "The Good News of Justice"

Nahum 1:15—2:13

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Sunday, March 19, 2023 (The Season of Lent)

Scripture Reading

"Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off. The scatterer has come up against you. Man the ramparts; watch the road; dress for battle; collect all your strength. For the LORD is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel, for plunderers have plundered them and ruined their branches. The shield of his mighty men is red; his soldiers are clothed in scarlet. The chariots come with flashing metal on the day he musters them; the cypress spears are brandished. The chariots race madly through the streets; they rush to and fro through the squares; they gleam like torches; they dart like lightning. He remembers his officers; they stumble as they go, they hasten to the wall; the siege tower is set up. The river gates are opened; the palace melts away; its mistress is stripped; she is carried off, her slave girls lamenting, moaning like doves and beating their breasts. Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. 'Halt! Halt!' they cry, but none turns back. Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things. Desolate! Desolation and ruin! Hearts melt and knees tremble; anguish is in all loins; all faces grow pale! Where is the lions' den, the feeding place of the young lions, where the lion and lioness went, where his cubs were, with none to disturb? The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses; he filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh. Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard" (Nahum 1:15–2:13).

Introduction

Right now, we are in the midst of a season in the historical church calendar known as Lent.

Lent is composed of the six weeks that lead up to the celebration of Easter. For centuries, Christians of many cultures and languages and ages have observed Lent as a season of fasting and prayer. It is a season wherein Christians build our anticipation of the good news of resurrection, by remembering the crucial need to repent. In this way, the purpose of Lent is to help us understand the nature of sin so that we might understand our need for a Savior.

This is one of the reasons we are currently studying the often over-looked and neglected Old Testament book of Nahum. I would argue Nahum is a book that is uniquely appropriate for the season of Lent. Nahum is a Lenten text not just because of its darker tone and subject matter. Nahum is a Lenten text because it helps us understand sin and salvation in a way we often miss.

You see, Americans live in a hyper-individualistic culture. You could even say we live in a systemically individualistic culture. This means our culture actively forms us and shapes us to live our lives in a way that places the individual self and independence at the center of everything. No one has to teach you how to be an individualist. It's in the very air we breathe.

So when American Christians think of ideas like sin and salvation, we tend to think of them in strictly individualistic ways. We think of sin as the bad things that I do as an individual. We think of salvation as God's grace for me as individual. And to be sure, sin and salvation are not less than individual and personal realities. But are so much more.

And the prophets of the Old Testament, like Nahum, help us broaden our horizons and see beyond our cultural blind spots of individualism. The prophets were given eyes to see not only the personal nature of sin—they were able to see the corporate and cosmic nature of sin as well.

Sin flows from the disordered desires of the human heart, but sin also can also be woven into the very fabric of society. Sin can be encouraged and enculturated through the systems and structures of the world.

A sin-fractured world favors the ruthless and makes it very difficult to challenge those who abuse their power. A sin-fractured world incentivizes governments and industries and businesses to treat people like disposable utilities rather image-bearers of their creator God. A sin-fractured world provokes and incites the sin of lust and uses lust to market products and entertain. A sin-fractured world rewards greed and corruption and sees kindness and integrity as liabilities and weaknesses. A sin-fractured world, in the words of the Psalmist, "frames injustice by statute" (Ps 94:20).

The prophet Nahum helps us see this corporate and cosmic dimension of sin in this world as represented by the city of Nineveh and the evil empire of Assyria that it ruled. But even more, Nahum reminds us that the wickedness of the world will be judged.

And divine judgment is no small matter. The truth of divine judgment should fill our hearts with humility and awe. But it should also fill our hearts with hope. For the outcome of God's judgment is not destruction. The outcome of God's judgment is justice—the restoration not only of broken hearts but of this sin-fractured world.

In this way, Nahum teaches us to see God's judgement not only as something to fear but also yearn for. We are long for justice, and to see the hope and promise of God's justice as good news. Our passage today is a vision of "The Good News of Divine Justice."

Exposition

1) The Downfall of Nineveh as a Historical Fact

Over the course of this Spring break, our family decided to watch movie marathon of the old Rocky movies. The story of Rocky is the creation Sylvester Stallone. It's about an underdog boxer who gets a shot at becoming a professional champion.

But like any great story, the story of Rocky is about more than boxing. It's about the psychology of competition and conflict. It's about over-coming fear. It's about standing toe to toe with the challenge in front of you, no matter how scary or strong it looks and refusing to back down.

In many ways, this mentality is behind the book of Nahum. The prophet is giving God's people a pep-talk. He is speaking to the tiny kingdom of Judah and telling them not to lose hope. In fact, he is commanding them to stand up and be fearless in the face of what looks like certain defeat.

And defeat does look certain. The empire of Assyria looks invincible. Assyria is the most powerful nation on the planet that has already conquered everyone around Judah. Nineveh, Assyria's capital city, might very well be the most populous, most wealthy, most impressive, and most powerful city on the planet [show 1The Glory of Nineveh].

Assyria is the undisputed champion of the ancient Near East. They have their eyes set on defeating the kingdom of Judah. But just then, a new challenger has enters the ring.

Assyria is impressive, but all they have taken on is paltry kingdoms of men and city states. They have never gone up against the omnipotent God. they have yet to contend with the three-personed creator of the cosmos; the great redeemer, who delivers his people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Thus, chapter 2 begins with a challenge from God directly to the king of Nineveh. God is saying, "Alright, big boy, square up. Put up your hands. Let's see what you got." God tells his opponent, "The scatterer has come up against you. Man the ramparts; watch the road; dress for battle; collect all your strength" (Nah 2:1).

God is saying, "Give me your best. Don't hold anything back." So now, Nineveh will try to flex.

Nahum is a richly descriptive prophet. At the beginning of chapter 2, he paints a vivid picture with his words. It is a poetic scene of soldiers drawing up in lines of battle. We see swords drawn, shields raised, and soldiers clad in scarlet red robes. There are so many spears it looks

like a forest (והִבְרִישִׁים). Gleaming chariots dart forth with the speed and violence of a lightning strike.

It is a vision of impressive posturing and intimidation of the virtually undefeated Assyrian armies are marshaled for battle.

But then, suddenly, without a clear transition or explanation, the scene changes [show **2The Fall of Nineveh**].

Assyria's military officers are fleeing. The city walls are breached. The royal palace is overwhelmed, as if it were overcome by a rushing flood. Women are weeping and wailing. Chaos erupts in the streets. The city's vast wealth is plundered.

The great city of Nineveh is fallen.

Look at how Nahum describes this sudden change: *"The shield of his mighty men is red; his soldiers are clothed in scarlet. The chariots come with flashing metal on the day he musters them; the cypress spears are brandished. The chariots race madly through the streets; they rush to and fro through the squares; they gleam like torches; they dart like lightning. He remembers his officers; they stumble as they go, they hasten to the wall; the siege tower is set up. The river gates are opened; the palace melts away; its mistress is stripped; she is carried off, her slave girls lamenting, moaning like doves and beating their breasts. Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. 'Halt! Halt!' they cry, but none turns back. Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things. Desolate! Desolation and ruin! Hearts melt and knees tremble; anguish is in all loins; all faces grow pale!" (Nahum 2:3–10).*

The buildup of anticipation with the sudden defeat reminds me of a scene in the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The hero, the archeologist Indiana Jones, is being chased through the streets of Cairo, Egypt, and he is stopped in his tracks by a massive man with a sword. You get the idea that the man is an expert swordsman. He flashes his sword and performs a bunch of complicated moves as a way to intimidate Indiana Jones. But after his impressive display of prowess, Indiana Jones simply lifts a pistol from his holster and shoots the swordsman.

The scene is almost comical and intentionally anti-climactic. After all of this impressive buildup, the battle ends without much fanfare or the breaking of a sweat. The idea is that you shouldn't bring a sword to a gunfight.

And in the same way, Nahum is reminding the people of God that the most impressive army of the kingdom of man does not pose even the slightest threat to the God of glory.

But we must remember Nahum is writing these words at a time when Assyria looks invulnerable. Nahum is seeing something and proclaiming something that seems impossible. But then, the impossible happens.

In 612 B.C., Nineveh will be sacked and destroyed. The once greatest city in the world will be left in a pile of burnt ruins that will be conquered over and over again. In fact, several ancient statues and archeological sites of Nineveh were demolished by ISIS as recently as 2014, when ISIS captured the Iraqi city of Mosul (which where the ruins of ancient Nineveh are located today).

The big idea: Nahum's prophetic vision becomes a verified historical reality.

Chapter 2 then concludes with a final death blow to Nineveh's pride in the form of a taunt. God compares the destruction of Nineveh with the hunting of a lion. And there is a reason this boast against the king of Nineveh would have stung in a particularly strong way.

The Assyrians were infatuated with lions and the hunting of lions. In fact, if you go to the British Museum in London, you can see a display of some of the sculptures that adorned the walls of the Assyrian royal palace in Nineveh. And on those displays, you will find a bas relief depictions of an Assyrian lion hunt [show [3Lion Reliefs](#)].

At the time, these were some of the most remarkable sculptures ever made, and these particular sculptures depict the glory of King Ashurbanipal, the king who ruled at the zenith of Assyria's power [show [4Ashurbanipal](#)].

Ashurbanipal was likely a contemporary of the prophet Nahum, perhaps the ruler who ruled when Nahum's book was written.

The scene shows Ashurbanipal's lion hunt in progress. After Assyrians were proud hunters and warriors, but according to Assyrian law, only kings could hunt lions [show [5Ashurbanipal vs the Lion](#)]. Usually, such hunted lions were already captured. They were hunted by the king, not within the wild of nature, but within a type of arena, as a public spectacle with a political purpose.

The lion wasn't just an intimidating predator. The lion was a symbol of untamed chaos; the power of the natural world beyond human civilization. To hunt and prevail over a lion was a flex of the king of Assyria's power [show [6Defeated Lion](#)]. It was a way to display the king's lordship over the created world; his mastery over chaos and nature. It was a way to project that the king of Assyria was larger than life and a type of god-man.

But Nahum flips the metaphor. Here the Lord is the lion-hunter, and the King of Assyria is now the hunted lion! The Lord asks, *"Where is the lions' den, the feeding place of the young lions,*

where the lion and lioness went, where his cubs were, with none to disturb? The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses; he filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh. Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard" (Nah 2:11–13).

The power of the once invincible Nineveh is brought to an end.

What does this matter for us today? I do believe we must approach God's word with conviction and faith that it is helpful for our teaching and instruction (cf. 2 Tim 3:16), even when it is hard to initially understand. And then we must do the hard work to learn what it is saying.

The key to understanding a book like Nahum is to understand how prophecy in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, prophecy is not just a forecast of the future. Prophetic literature is apocalyptic. Apocalypse means not the end of the world but an unveiling of the spiritual truth that lay hidden behind the visible reality of the material world.

An example from the history of the Old Testament helps illustrate this point. Elisha was one of the older prophets in the kingdom of Israel. The book of Kings records a moment when enemy armies are closing in around this prophet's home.

The prophet's servant sees the armies and warns his master. But the prophet looks outside but does not seem alarmed. The servant asks why he does not seem afraid. The prophet says, "we have more on our side."

The servant is bewildered. How could this be? The prophet and his servant are only two, and an army is outside.

But the prophet prays that God would open his servant's eyes. The servant's eyes are opened, and he beholds mountains filled with vast legions of angel armies and fire. This is what prophecy is meant to help us see as well.

Biblical prophecy helps give us eyes that see the true nature of spiritual reality. When the evil of this world seems unbearable, when suffering seems inescapable, when the powers of evil seem undefeatable, the truth of God's word gives us eyes to see the unseen and to hope in a God that is mightier than the sin of this world .

2) The Downfall of Nineveh as a Future Hope

Nahum introduces the proclamation of Nineveh's defeat in a very peculiar way. Before he sees the fall of Nineveh, he sees the image of a messenger on the mountain bringing a message of good news. But this is not the only place in the Bible where this exact language is used.

In fact, the book of Isaiah has a strikingly similar passage. Isaiah 52 reads:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’ The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa 52:7–10).

But if you know the context, the parallels of these passages might seem confusing. Nahum is talking about the fall of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah is talking about the fall of Babylon and the Babylonian Empire, a later superpower and threat to God’s people.

But this is not an accident. Nahum is talking about more than just Nineveh, and Isaiah is saying something true about more than Babylon.

The prophets are revealing something true about the kingdoms of this world; about all systems of power built on sin and injustice, violence and oppression. The prophets are making an announcement against all empires that exalt themselves to the place of divinity.

They are reminding us: God’s judgment is coming. God has not forgotten his people. Even with the situation looks hopeless, God is at work. History is bending toward justice because God is bending it. God will not allow evil to go unpunished. He will hold all sin accountable. He will bring judgment and justice upon this world.

This is a message of hope, but it is also a warning. What is assumed in Nahum is made explicit in Isaiah. God’s saying to his people: come out of the world because judgment is coming.¹

As Isaiah commands, *“Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the LORD. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard” (Isa 52:11–12).*

God is saying to his people, “You are in the world, but you are not to be of the world. Don’t join yourself to the kingdoms of this world. Don’t let them become your identity and hope. Don’t allow yourself to become habituated and enslaved to the ways of the world.”

The language of going out and God going before his people and also being their rear-guard is the language of the Exodus; the ancient miracle of God delivering his people Israel from slavery in Egypt.

¹ See also Revelation 18:4

The good news of Nahum (and Isaiah) is the announcement of a new Passover and a new exodus. But instead of merely rescuing his people from the tyranny of slavery in Egypt, he will deliver his people from the cosmic tyranny of sin.

3) **The Day of the Lord**

The theme of cosmic judgment and salvation speaks to a major theme throughout the prophets of the Old Testament—the Day of the Lord.

A day of divine judgement and wrath; a fearsome and awesome moment prefigured by the fall of kingdoms and nations, but testifying to an ultimate reality and ultimate hope

Here are just a few examples of how the day of the Lord is described and just how many prophets are concerned with this theme:

*“Wail, for **the day of the LORD** is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!” (Isa 13:6).*

*“That day is **the day of the Lord God of hosts**, a day of vengeance, to avenge himself on his foes....” (Jer 46:10).*

*“For the day is near, **the day of the LORD** is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations” (Eze 30:3).*

*“Alas for the day! For **the day of the LORD** is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes” (Joel 1:15).*

*“For **the day of the LORD** is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head” (Oba 1:15).*

The day of the Lord is a terrifying reality because the day of the Lord is a day of judgment. But the day of the Lord is also longed-for reality because it is also a day of justice.

Evil will be held to account, and the world will be put to rights . This is a deep aching cry of the Old Testament, especially when the people of God are suffering. The Psalmist cries out in Psalm 94: *“O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?” (Ps 94:1–3).*

Now while Nahum never uses the exact phrase “the day of the Lord,” his whole book is about this prophetic theme. Nahum is all about God’s wrath and judgment upon evil. And, crucially, Nahum wants us to know that the coming judgment of the day of the Lord is good news.

Nahum's book might even be the earliest instance of the now-famous phrase, "good news" or "gospel." Originally, the phrase "good news" did not refer to a religious set of doctrines. Instead, good news referred to a declaration and a proclamation.

The idea is that an ancient king of a walled city has gone out to battle against an invading army. As the battle raged at some distance, those in the city would await news of the outcome.

If the army lost, the king would send back a military advisor to help prepare the city for siege. If the army won, the king would send back a herald to declare victory and prepare the city for celebration when the king returned.

Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, is a city surrounded with mountains; it is enclosed like a natural fortress. Now, imagine being a city watchman in Jerusalem, waiting urgently and expectantly.

Then, imagine seeing a runner come up over a mountain and being able to discern from a distance, this is not a military advisor—this is a proclaimer of good news! You would say, behold the herald on the hills, behold, how beautiful the feet!

As Nahum proclaims, *"Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off"* (Nahum 1:15).

And what is that good news that Nahum declares? It is the good news is the enemy is vanquished! The lion is defeated! The day of the Lord, the day of justice has come and is coming! And with justice comes restoration of all that is broken

As Nahum says to God's people, *"For the LORD is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel, for plunderers have plundered them and ruined their branches"* (Nah 2:2).

These words were written to a fearful people, a suffering people, a people who felt like their lives and the futures were contingent and uncertain.

In this way, the Nahum reminds us the Bible does not ignore the problem of evil or the pain so suffering. God's word acknowledges our pain and gives us comfort and hope that will not disappoint.

So if you are grieved by the wickedness and sin of the world, Nahum is for you. If you are incensed at the corruption of the powerful and the oppression of the weak, Nahum is for you. If you want the powers of evil to be held to account and justice to come, Nahum is for you—the day of the Lord has come and the day of the Lord is coming.

Conclusion

Nineveh fell this is good. But Babylon arose to take its place, and this is bad. Many other empires have risen to power as well. Their existence shows that there is a perfect justice that is yet to come.

How will ultimate justice come?

Well, first we have to define how ultimate does not come. Just like the people of the ancient world, we tend to put our hope in the deliverance from the kingdom of man. When evil arises with power, we want to respond to that power with our own power.

But empires rise and fall. And it is clear Nahum doesn't put his hope in the kingdom that will destroy Nineveh. To put our hope in the kingdom of men is to put our hope in a perpetual cycle of violence. In this way, the solution to Assyria (Babylon) will become a bigger problem.

So, then, if not through the power of the kingdom of man, how will God bring forth true and lasting justice? How will God's kingdom come?

Isaiah's parallel passage good news fills in a crucial piece of the puzzle. Isaiah chapter 52, the same chapter that talks about the herald on the hills with good news, keeps going and, I believe, shows us how the empires of men will be finally defeated and the unforeseen way the kingdom of God will prevail.

After declaring that good news is coming, after commanding God's people to come out of the world, Isaiah ends chapter 52 with the beginning of a new vision:

"Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind— so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand" (Isaiah 52:13–15).

God's kingdom will prevail, and restoration will come not through political power or military might, but by one who is the Suffering Servant. God's kingdom will come through Jesus Christ and Christ crucified. Isaiah then describes this Suffering Servant in a passage that is perhaps the clearest prophetic picture of the cross of Jesus.

He declares, *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4–5).*

Centuries after Nahum, centuries after Isaiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, one who is completely God and completely man, would be pierced for our transgressions on a cross.

Now, the cross was not originally a religious symbol. The cross was the ultimate weapon of the empire of men. Death on a cross is a slow and gruesome form of hanging designed for maximum pain and humiliation. This is why crosses were placed in high-traffic areas for high visibility. The cross was a billboard that threatened. If you oppose our kingdom and our power, this will happen to you!

It is interesting to note that death by crucifixion was perfected and made infamous by the Roman Empire. But the practice itself originated in none other than the empire of Assyria.

The practice was then passed on to Babylonia, Persia, and Rome as a way to strike terror into the hearts of men.

But what was once the ultimate power of men will become the ultimate symbol of the victory of the kingdom of God.

Now, in light of the gospel, the cross reminds us that the God who stands at the end of history as our Sovereign Judge is also the Suffering Servant. And because he was broken, we will be restored. Because he took the penalty of our sin, we will be made righteous. Because he experienced judgment, all injustice will be healed, and all things will be made new.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we behold with awe and wonder the truth of God's judgment. May we learn to yearn for redemption and restoration for our sin-fractured world. May we celebrate the good news of divine justice.

AMEN.