

NAHUM

Part 3: “The End of Evil”

Nahum 3:1–7; 18–19

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Sunday, March 26, 2023 (The Season of Lent)

Scripture Reading

“Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder— no end to the prey! The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end— they stumble over the bodies! And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms. Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, ‘Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?’ Where shall I seek comforters for you?... Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them. There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?” (Nah 3:1–7; 18–19).

Introduction

Monday was market day in the village of Guernica, a small, picturesque town nestled among the mountains of northern Spain. For years, on market day, people from the surrounding region traveled to buy and sell in the city markets and enjoy the city’s restaurants. And for this reason, the tiny town of Guernica would swell to twice its normal size on Mondays.

At first, Monday, April 26, 1937, was a market day like any other. But sometime around 4:30pm in the afternoon warplanes appeared over the skies of Guernica and, for the next several hours, proceeded to drop over one hundred thousand pounds bombs on the city.

The fire station and medical facilities were the first to be destroyed. Then, the residential neighborhoods were engulfed in flames that could no longer be extinguished. Then, the city markets were attacked, sending terrified residents fleeing for whatever cover they could find. Those that attempted to escape into the fields outside of the town were met by the machine gun fire of the planes that encircled the perimeter of the village in a ring of fire.

Guernica was an open village without walls. It was a civilian village without any defense of any kind. Not only were the residents of this small town completely surprised at such a violent attack, they were utterly *helpless* to defend themselves.

As the bombing subsided and planes flew away, the sun set over a Guernica in ruins [1The Rubble of the Guernica Bombings]. Some estimate that a third of the city's population died in the raid, with many more injured and displaced.

While carried out by German planes, the attack came at the behest of General Francisco Franco, the leader of the Spanish nationalists in the Spanish Civil War.¹ The Basque region of northern Spain was largely opposed to Franco's nationalism, and so Franco wanted to make an example of what would happen to those who would resist him.

The village of Guernica was chosen because it was a regional center. Monday was chosen because it was a market day. A surprise air raid on a civilian population was chosen because Franco wanted his opponents to be terrified of what he was willing to do to acquire power.

News of this ruthless attack on innocent civilian shocked and scandalized the world. Among those outraged was a Spanish man who also happened to be the most renowned artist of his time. That artist's name was Pablo Picasso [2Picasso Painting Guernica].

By the time of Spanish Civil War, Picasso was living in exile from his homeland of Spain, but he was already internationally famous in the world of art. But it was the air raid on the unsuspecting village that inspired him to paint what many would regard as his masterpiece. The name of that masterpiece is *Guernica* [3Guernica].

At twelve feet tall and twenty-six feet wide, Picasso's *Guernica* is a massive painting that fills the back wall of a very large room. The black and white color scheme evokes the stark contrast of innocence before the overwhelming darkness of violence and evil. In the 1930s, when the painting was completed, the color scheme would have also called to mind black and white newspapers and newsreels, and, in this way, the artist is capturing the present-tense immediacy of the horrors of war.

Instead of telling the story of this one battle, Picasso communicates overlapping symbols of violent battle, broken bodies, and searing grief and terror. In this way, Picasso's *Guernica* is not just about one battle within one war—it is an image of *all* battles; it is an image of *all* war.

It is a painting that is meant to dispel war of all its romanticism and ideal fantasy and instead expose both the vanity, absurdity, and horror of violence and the unrestrained lust for power.

¹ Note while the Guernica attack was on behalf of the Spanish Nationalists, the attack itself was carried out by the German Luftwaffe. Francisco Franco had recently made an alliance with a fellow nationalist and newly elected Chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler. Many now see the Nazi involvement in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s as a type of “dress rehearsal” for the *blitzkrieg* tactics that the Germans used in the invasion of France in World War 2.

Yet, image also invites the viewer toward a longing for peace.

Nearly a year ago, my wife and I saw *Guernica* in person, and it is a truly overwhelming image to behold [4*Guernica Today*]. Even to this day, it attracts crowds of people from around the globe, and it continues to move people with an almost universal language. It is a piece that is simultaneously haunting in its horror yet striking in its beauty.

I've had the image of *Guernica* lodged in my mind ever since we began studying the words of the Old Testament Prophet Nahum. Like *Guernica*, Nahum is a book filled with overlapping images of violence and the suffering violence causes. Nahum is a book that foretells divine wrath against Nineveh—a city built on violence. But, like *Guernica*, it is meant to function as an indictment against all regimes that are founded on bloodshed. *Guernica* is meant to expose the horror of wanton war. But Nahum is doing something even more—Nahum is exposing the reality of evil in a way that invites us to see a future reality when all evil will be vanquished.

Nahum offers us more than just a hope. He offers a promise that God has made a way for "*The End of Evil*." And we will witness how that promise unfolds as we unfold the words of Nahum chapter 3 today.

We'll organize our discussion under three headings: 1.) *The Evil of Evil*, 2.) *The Exposure of Evil*, and finally 3.) *The End of Evil*.

Exposition

1.) The Evil of Evil

In prophetic literature, there are speeches known as oracles of warning. An oracle of warning is the equivalent of a legal demand letter. An oracle of warning is God sending an official message that says, "cease and desist or consequences will be severe." An oracle of warning is a serious matter, but it allows for repentance and restitution.

An oracle of woe, on the other hand, means that the time to repent has passed. The oracle of woe is a pronouncement of certain judgment.

In Jonah chapter 3, the prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh to proclaim an oracle of warning. In Nahum chapter 3, nearly a century after the events of Jonah, the prophet Nahum will pronounce an oracle of woe.

The entirety of Nahum has been building to this climactic moment of chapter 3. God has revealed his righteous wrath and his heart for justice. Now, as the Divine Judge, he pronounces his sentence against a city that is overflowing with deception and full of wealth stolen from others; a city of bloodlust and greed. Nahum declares, "*Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder— no end to the prey!*" (Nah 3:1).

Like Picasso's *Guernica*, the prophet Nahum then paints a scene with his words of violence and death: *"The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end— they stumble over the bodies!"* (Nah 3:2–3).

If you've been with us the last few weeks, you may remember that Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian empire. At the time of Nahum's life, Assyria is without a doubt the most powerful nation in the world. Their empire stretches from Egypt to modern-day Iran, and they have acquired power over these vast lands and the people who dwell in it through conquest.

Now, the Assyrians believed they were entitled to rule the lands and nations around them. They thought they were bringing order and wisdom and culture to the nations they conquered. Assyrian religion even fostered a sense of divine approval for Assyrian kings to go forth and conquer and expand the glory of Assyria. The Assyrians, thus, viewed themselves as having a divine *right* to power. And because they believed this, the Assyrians felt completely justified in crushing anyone who would resist them.

In this environment, it was not uncommon for the leaders of nations to attempt to compromise with and placate Assyria. They would attempt to bribe Assyria with wealth and commitments to pay heavy tribute. They would send soldiers to go and support Assyria's endless wars. They would flatter the king of Assyria in hopes of earning his favor.

But God has not sent Nahum to the prophet to placate or pacify Assyria. He has sent Nahum to name Assyria's evil and confront it.

So, Nahum will not flatter Assyria. Instead, he compares the empire to a harlot and an enchantress. Assyria pretends to charm the nations around her, but she only intends to betray them and sell them out (Nah 3:4).

These words of the prophet are harsh. But they are intended to wake the people of God up to the reality of the world.

So too, the word of the Lord at times functions like smelling salts in our lives. Our sin-fractured world is as powerful as it is seductive. The charms of the world can desensitize us to the problem of evil and the suffering it causes. But the word of God wakes us up to see the evil of evil.

Nahum invites us to name the flashing swords and glittering spears that perpetuate brokenness and sin around us. Nahum invites us to see the ways we've been charmed and enchanted into complacency.

For we too live in a world that is seduced by greed and the hunger for more. We too live in a world where the weak suffer and the powerful are nearly impossible to hold

accountable. We too live in a world where violence is justified by those who profiteer in stoking cultural division and endless war.

Perhaps, we as individuals do not choose the same means of violence as the ancient Assyrians. But the talking heads of cable news and the algorithms of social media often fashion words into razors that slice and cut one another. We may not plunder cities, but many of the industries we work in incentivize us to take advantage of others in business. We may not be charmed by the enchantments of Assyria, but many of us are tempted to indulge substances, entertainment, and online images as a way to find false peace and rest.

But the word of the Lord wakes us up. The word of the Lord calls to turn away from sin; to turn away from compromise and complicity with this world; to see evil as evil that it might be exposed.

2.) The Exposure of Evil

Nahum has some pretty bold words for Assyria. But is also clear that he, the prophet, is not Assyria's real enemy. He is just the messenger.

The one who has announced himself as against the Assyrian empire is none other than "the Lord of hosts." The Hebrew name is literally "Yaweḥ Sabaoth" (יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת). It is a military title. It means the Lord armies, or even the Lord of angel armies.

The Lord of Israel is not the patron God of some petty ancient Near East nation. This is the God who commands the cosmos and the legions of heaven. He possesses all might and authority, and now he will pronounce his judgment against the most powerful nation on earth.

Verse 5 reads: "*Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame*" (Nah 3:5).

Notice that the first element of God's judgment is to expose the evil of Assyria. The metaphor is one of nakedness, but it is important to remember in an ancient context nudity was not always erotic in nature. In fact, most often public nudity was an act of humiliation. It was a way to put an enemy in a place of weakness and shame.

For this reason, when an ancient city surrendered after a long siege, the conquering army would require the captured citizens to walk on foot without any clothes, completely exposed and completely put to shame.

The great power, wealth, and fame of the Assyrian empire was once feared before the eyes of the whole world. But now, the Lord declares that the Assyrian empire will be exposed and put to shame before the eyes of the whole world. Once the dread of nations, God will make Assyria into a "spectacle" (Nah 3:6).

But I believe there is quite literally another dimension to this passage. The title “Lord of hosts” reminds us that God’s war with Assyria is not ultimately a *physical* war—it is a *spiritual* war. There is an *evil-behind-the-evil* of Assyria that God will oppose. There are spiritual powers behind the earthly powers of empire that the Lord will expose.

As the Apostle Paul writes later in the New Testament, “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*” (Eph 6:12).

And how are the people of God to stand against these cosmic powers over this present darkness?

We stand. We stand in the armor God. We stand in the strength of his might.

Paul continues, “*...be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil....take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm*” (Eph 6:10–11; 13).

We don’t fight the powers of evil our self. We don’t fight the powers of evil the weapons of this world.

God is the Lord of hosts, not us. He is the warrior, not us. He is alone is the one who is able to oppose and expose the powers of evil.

In the same way that Nahum says Assyria will be exposed and put to shame, through the cross of Jesus Christ God has already “*..disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him*” (Col 2:15).

Evil has already been exposed by the cross, but there is a day coming when evil will end.

3.) The End of Evil

At the time the prophet Nahum writes his book, the Assyrian empire is at its very zenith of power. They looked invincible. The notion that the Assyrians could be defeated seemed not only impossible, but unimaginable. Nevertheless, Nahum announces that Assyria’s reign will come to an end. The city of Nineveh will be judged. And, in what we might call an instance of God’s retributive justice, Assyria’s own brutality will be the very means that its own capital city will fall.

The metaphor that Nahum uses to describe the fall of Nineveh is the fall of another city—the city of Thebes on the Nile (or what today is known as Karnak, Egypt)[⁵The Temple of Karnak].

Thebes on the Nile it was an impressive, beautiful, and legendary city as well in the ancient world. It was one of the few places in this world that people have inhabited since

before the year 3000 B.C. One way to think about the age of Thebes on the Nile is that there were monuments standing in Thebes during the time of Nahum—and that still stand today—that were older to Nahum than the Roman coliseum is to us.

Established several miles south of the famous Egyptian pyramids, Thebes on the Nile was one of the great centers of power for ancient Egypt, and often times it was used as the capital city from which the Pharaoh would rule.

Thebes was also a place of refuge; a place where Egyptian kings would flee when under attack or retreat [6Thebes on the Nile]. It was located far upstream the Nile, in the very heart of Egypt, and it was protected by a natural moat of the Nile river on one side and a natural fortress of mountains.

But something happened during Nahum's lifetime that shocked the world—it fell before the power of the Assyrian armies. However, the prophet Nahum twists the fall of Thebes against the Assyrians. He is basically saying, if a city as mighty and as Thebes can fall—with all her defenses and all her military alliances—Nineveh can fall too.

The prophet asks: *“Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her, her rampart a sea, and water her wall? Cush was her strength; Egypt too, and that without limit; Put and the Libyans were her helpers”* (Nah 3:8–9).

In the year 667 B.C., King Ashurbanipal of Assyria led his armies down into the heartland of Egypt and sacked Thebes on the Nile [7Assyria's Conquest of Egypt]. Several sculptures and royal records show that the King was rather proud of this victory. Those same records show that the Assyrian king inflicted terror and violence upon those he defeated in a way that was shockingly cruel, even by ancient standards.

Nahum describes the horrific reality of Assyria's brutality against the Egyptians: *“Yet she became an exile; she went into captivity; her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; for her honored men lots were cast, and all her great men were bound in chains. You also will be drunken; you will go into hiding; you will seek a refuge from the enemy”* (Nah 3:10–11).

The big idea is that the defeat of Thebes on the Nile was a literal monument to the seemingly undefeatable power of Assyria. But God flips the metaphor. And the violence that Assyria perpetuated against Thebes will become the violence its own capital city will soon endure.

Nahum declares, *“You also will be drunken; you will go into hiding; you will seek a refuge from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with first-ripe figs— if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater”* (Nah 3:11–12).

And in 612 B.C., the city of Nineveh falls [8The Fall of Nineveh]. As she gathered great wealth through plundering other kingdoms, other kingdoms will plunder her. As she conquered with brutality, she will be brutally conquered. As she sent nations into exile, so too her people will be exiled.

Through its own evil, the evil of Assyria will be brought to a final end. And the world around Assyria will for a brief moment heave a sigh of relief that tyranny of this violent nation is no more.

There are examples in history of fallen nations that have been mourned by the world. For example, the Italian poet Dante Alighieri wrote in the 1300s, and he still mourned the loss of the Roman empire that had fallen nearly a thousand years prior.

Some powerful nations and empires bring infrastructure that helps normal people travel and conduct business. Some nations and empires write laws and enforce those laws as a way of promoting fairness and justice. At their best, powerful nations are able to bring some semblance of order in a world of chaos, and for that reason, when they fall they are mourned.

But Nahum lets us know that no one is going to bemoan the loss of Assyria's power. Instead, the fall of Assyria will be celebrated as if the Death Star were blown up. No one is coming to Assyria's funeral (they're too busy singing "Yub Nub" with the Ewoks).

Nahum writes, *"And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, 'Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?' Where shall I seek comforters for you?...Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them. There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?"* (Nahum 3:7, 18–19).

The end of evil is good news.

Conclusion

And this is why the understudied, often neglected book of Nahum is good news.

Despite its fearsome images of horror and divine wrath, Nahum is ultimately a message of comfort for God's people. It's no mistake that Nahum's very name means "comfort." In fact, in Isaiah 40:1, when the prophet says, *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,"* the Hebrew is literally, *"Nahamu, Nahamu, ami"* (נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ אֲמִי).

We don't know much about the prophet Nahum, but we do know that he was likely a man who was in need of the very comfort he offered [[9Icon of Nahum](#)].

It's possible that Nahum was a refugee or a descendant of refugees from the northern kingdom of Israel that fell before the power and brutality of Assyria. The small city of Capernaum—the same city from which Jesus based his ministry in Galilee—can literally mean the village of Nahum. But as a part of northern Israel, it would have been under Assyrian control when Nahum sees his vision of divine justice and writes his prophetic book.

Perhaps, Nahum is not unlike the survivors of Guernica who lost their homes to firebombs and air raids, and then had to watch in exile as General Francisco Franco rose to power in Spain. Perhaps he feels like the modern-day refugees from Afghanistan who watched their nation fall to the wicked power of the Taliban. Perhaps, Nahum is just a man who feels homeless and powerless before the powers of evil in this world—but then he sees something the world cannot see.

Perhaps there are some of you who have endured wounds and suffering. Perhaps there are some who have been wronged, suffered some type of injustice, and experienced pain that will not likely be remedied or healed on this side of eternity.

To you, Nahum offers a vision of comfort. There is a God who has not forgotten you or your pain. There is a God who sees evil for what it is and burns with a righteous wrath against sin. There is a God who is just and true. There is a God who is bending history not only to defeat the power of evil—but end it once and for all. And this is exactly why God has sent Jesus into this world.

You see, there is a consistent pattern in Scripture. God brings evil back upon itself, and God destroys evil with its own power. It's like an unexpected divine Judo move that God performs over and over again.

In the Exodus, Pharaoh's pride will become the source of his humiliation and defeat. In 1 Samuel, the giant Goliath is decapitated by his own sword. In 1 Kings, the prophets of Baal will die before their own idols. In Esther, the wicked Haman will hang on the gallows he built. In Nahum, Assyria will fall by its own bloodlust and violence.

But all of these examples are mere signposts of what Christ has done and has promised to do for his people. For through the evil of the cross, all evil will be vanquished. Through Jesus's death, death will die. The foot that was bruised by the serpent will one day soon crush the head of the snake. And as the power of sin once broke the world, the power of resurrection will restore it.

Because of Jesus, there is a day coming when evil and all the pain it causes will be a forgotten memory swallowed up in glory. As the book of Revelation promises, *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away'"* (Rev 21:1–4).

Redeemer Christian Church, may we long for this day to come. May we long for the end of evil and the day when all things are made new. May we rest and take comfort in the truth that the one who has promised redemption and restoration is faithful and true. AMEN.