

Certain Judgement

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- [0 : 0 0] But we're going to turn now to our reading from the Bible. If you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of copies available at the side, at the back. Please do take a Bible if you need it.
- And we are in the book of Nahum, which you'll find towards the end of the Old Testament, just before Habakkuk, after Micah.
- And we are in Nahum, chapter 3, and we're going to pick up the reading from verse 7. I'll give you a moment to find that. Nahum, chapter 3.
- And we'll read from verse 7. 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? Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile with water around her, her rampart a sea and water her wall?
- [1 : 0 5] Cush was her strength. Egypt too, and that without limit. Put and the Libyans were her helpers. Yet she became an exile.
- She went into captivity. Her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street. For her honoured 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. All your fortresses are like fig trees with first ripe figs.
- If shaken, they fall into the mouth of the eater. Behold, your troops are women in your midst. The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies.
- Fire has devoured your bars. Draw water for the siege. Strengthen your forts. Go into the clay. Tread the mortar. Take hold of the brick mould.
- [2 : 0 8] There will the fire devour you. The sword will cut you off. It will devour you like the locust. Multiply yourselves like the locust.
- Multiply like the grasshopper. You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens. The locust spreads its wings and flies away.
- Your princes are like grasshoppers. Grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold. When the sun rises, they fly away. No one knows where are they.
- Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria. Your noble 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?
- [3 : 1 2] Amen. And may God bless his word to us this evening. Well, do turn in your Bibles to Nahum chapter 3.
- Our fourth and final week in this short prophet. Why say something in 100 words when one will do?

Why say something in three chapters when one line will do? There are two pointed messages of judgment regarding Nineveh in the Bible.

And one of them is a single line in the prophet Jonah that simply says, Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

And at that, a mass repentance, a revival of repentance breaks out. Not sure many of us would regard Jonah's words as the archetypal sermon. And yet a dramatic response.

[4 : 22] And then we have Nahum. He brings a lengthy word of judgment upon Nineveh. So why do we have in our Bibles this long message that lingers on and on, on this same theme, the same fear point?

Why say in three chapters, what could be said and was said in one line? Well, of course we know it's no accident. I take it that Nahum takes three chapters to stack up all of the different facets of judgment because he wants to do more than make clear that it will happen.

He wants the recipients to feel the full width and comfort of what is being prophesied. To feel that judgment is set. To feel that evil will be dealt with severely.

To feel that God is in his very nature opposed to evil and not indifferent to what his people face. To feel that despite appearances, despite how mighty an enemy might seem, Nahum wants the Lord's people to feel that God moves against evil.

That he brooks new rebellion. And to feel that he looks at the proud prowling of those in power in this world. And he laughs at how pathetic they are.

[5 : 47] At how pathetic their fortresses are. How puny their might. And how passing their schemes. Nahum takes time to assure his readers that our good God reigns.

Nahum takes time to assure them that even the mightiest nations and forces rise and fall at the hand of a good God.

Nahum takes time to assure his readers that there is great comfort in God's character. And great comfort in his judgment for those who take refuge in him.

And these things are worth keeping in mind as we come to Nahum's conclusion. The final section of this book is marked by a couple of features.

First, it seems to be written as if addressed to Nineveh. It's hard to be certain about the extent of Nahum's audience for his book.

[6 : 48] He was certainly writing to the faithful people of God in Judah. But whether Nineveh would have been listening in or whether they'd have received a book is less clear. But I think Nahum finishes like this.

As if addressed directly to Nineveh. In order to really bring the force of his message home. And he does so through the other feature of this section.

It's a section marked by questions. Rhetorical questions. Paul read for us from verse 7. And from 3, 7 to 19, Nahum uses five questions to make his point.

Whereas in the rest of the book, there are three in total. Five questions that aren't begging answers. They're obvious, rhetorical. Used to really push home the point.

We looked at the two in verse 7 last week. But then in verse 8, are you better than Thebes? Do you think judgment won't come to you?

[7 : 52] Are you above it? Then at the end of verse 17, as Paul read. It isn't clear in the ESV, but that verse ends with a question.

Perhaps more helpful to be read. When the sun rises, they fly away. Their place is not known. Where are they? What good will all the worldly advantages do?

You'll look around and they'll have disappeared. Fled. Stripped you dry. And then verse 19. Upon whom has not come your unceasing evil.

The response to your fall will be universal. Nobody will be unmoved. For who haven't you wronged? Pointed words to finish a prophecy.

And so let's look at each of these three questions. The first one shows us. Nahum sabotaging the scoffer's skepticism. Nahum sabotaging the scoffer's skepticism.

[8 : 54] Verses 8 to 11. History is full of lessons that tell us that God really does move in judgment. And so it is a mistake for any to think that it won't come for them.

It has been the case since the very beginning that the reality of God's judgment has been questioned. Questioning whether there will be consequences for forsaking God's word and his ways.

Think all the way back to the garden and the serpent's words. You will not surely die. No, no, enjoy the fruit. Take it. Eat.

Such thoughts of consequences are only designed to limit you. In fact, don't think about judgment. Think instead about becoming like God. You will not surely die.

And then we read, Adam lived 930 years. And he died. And Seth died. And Enosh died. And on and on.

[9 : 55] There are myriad ways that we can suppress the reality of God's judgment. To some it will be ignoring it as reality. Pretending it away. To others it will be accepting that there is judgment.

But I'll be okay. That's for terrible people. Those people over there. Not people like me. And to others it will be by skewing the truth about God. To recast his character in a way that's more preferable to them.

Or to recast sin in a way that is more preferable to them. There are all manner of ways to suppress the reality of God's judgment. And Nahum wants to poke at such notions.

To undermine such thoughts. And so his first rhetorical question in our passage. Verse 8. Are you better than Thebes? It's a question asking.

Are you beyond judgment? Are you above judgment? Thebes was the capital city of the Egyptian empire. It had outstanding natural defenses.

[10 : 55] Sitting on the Nile. With water all around. Apparently when the Nile flooded. It was as much as two or even more miles wide. Around Thebes.

And so it would seem like different cities around there. Where we're like islands in the middle of the sea. And so it was a formidable prospect to attack and conquer Thebes. The odds would seem against any invader.

And it wasn't just the natural defenses surrounding it. Verse 9. Thebes had friendly nations to support them. Cush was there to help. The whole of the Egyptian empire too.

And at that they had seemingly unlimited soldiers. But that's not all. There was also Put and the Libyans. One scholar says, 400 miles down from the Nile Delta, an invading army from the north had to march.

To the right and to the left, they had to expose their flank to assault from nations friendly to Thebes. Having finally arrived before the massive city, 27 miles in circumference, the heated glare of a horizontal wall of water blinded them everywhere they looked.

[12 : 06] Surrounded by rivers, streams, canals and lakes, any invader would have to be overwhelmed by the sight that greeted their eyes. Are you greater than Thebes?

The question comes to Nineveh. And whilst they might have been able to answer yes, or might like to have answered yes, because after all, they were the nation that did undertake the long march and crush Thebes.

Yet Nahum's point is still that Thebes had even better natural defenses than Nineveh. And what happened? Verse 10. Yet she became an exile.

The mighty Thebes went into captivity. Her infants dashed. Her honored men treated like slaves. All the great men bound and led off. History is full of great nations, great powers, great people coming to unexpected and unlikely downfalls.

Are you better than this, Nineveh? Are you above it, beyond it? Listen to the Apostle Peter. If God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment, if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness for seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world, the ungodly, if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly, then the Lord knows how to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.

[13 : 49] Fallen angels didn't escape judgment. The world in Noah's day didn't escape judgment. Sodom and Gomorrah serve forever as an example.

That's what Peter says. And Thebes fell, despite all of its disadvantages, all of its advantages. Even she became an exile.

And verse 11, even you will be drunken. Even you will go into hiding. Even you shall seek refuge. History is full of lessons that tell us that God really does move in judgment.

So it's a mistake to think that it won't come for you. That's Nahum's message for Nineveh. For Nineveh, their own actions were recent enough in memory to highlight this very point.

If they could muster an army to crush with Thebes, then why wouldn't it be possible for the same thing to happen to them? At the hands of the next upstart on the world stage.

[14 : 56] The Lord works in history to raise up and pull down nations. And the pride that thinks such events are only relevant to other people is the very kind of pride that might just be met with a devastating downfall.

Nahum has a chastening message for any who set themselves up as enemies of God, to those who deign to cast God, to cast God's people, to cast his created order as dangerous, as disgusting.

He says to you, are you greater than Thebes? Are you greater than Assyria? To those who attack the Lord's people and push them out of society, Nahum says, are you greater than Sodom and Gomorrah?

Are you greater than the whole world, Bar Noah? Are you greater than the Third Reich? Greater than your first father, Adam?

Nahum says to those who are involved in gospel ministry, but are in it for themselves, they're involved in shady practices, using the Lord's people for their own ends.

[16 : 08] The Lord says, are you better than Thebes? Are you better than Adam? To those who play pretend at piety, live double lives, are you greater than Thebes?

Do you think you're above judgment, beyond it? To those who take the Lord lightly, are you greater than Thebes?

The scriptures tell of judgment, and history is littered with examples of it. Nahum's rebuttal of skepticism is to say, are you better than Thebes?

Will judgment not come for you? History answers such questions. And the Lord will indeed come for them.

And that's what we see secondly. The Lord pricks the pride. Verses 12 to 18. He pricks the pride. Very often the sin that provokes God's judgment is also the means of God's judgment.

[17 : 14] The drive to accrue vast worldly might and stature often becomes the snare that ultimately leads to ruin. Pride comes before a fall.

And there are two sides to God's pricking of pride in these verses. At first, He completely undermines all the worldly confidence that people have, taking it away as if it were nothing.

We see that in verses 12 to 15. And the key word is devar. And second, God also uses the things that are sinfully sought to be the cause of ruin.

And we see that in verses 15 to 18. And the key word there is lucas. So first, God undermines worldly confidence. It is possible today for those who have prominent positions in leading our nation away from so much of what is good and right and true into ungodliness, into rejecting all that the Lord has said.

It's easy for them to have a feeling of security and confidence because they're in the majority, because of their seat in parliament, because of their spot on primetime TV, because of their capture of the public or political consciousness, because of the laws they've passed or lobbied for, maybe because of their, the number of followers they have on social media.

[18 : 45] It's easy for them to feel like they have confidence and security. Indeed, for us, it's very possible in this world to accrue all manner of things that promise security, all manner of things that give a sense of safety.

It'll be okay. I have my investments. I have my house. I have my job. Everything will be okay. I've got a clean bill of health and I can charm people into my favor.

It'll be okay. I've had a quality education. I've got a great family. I've made a great name for myself. I've got good friends. My pension is bulging. My church holds me in high respect.

I'm an elder. And on and on, the list can go. Well, Assyria had much to put confidence in from a worldly perspective. But notice, what will the Lord do?

Verse 12. All your mighty fortresses that kept out any hint of opposition, well, before the Lord and his judgment, they are like fig trees with ripe figs.

[19 : 48] All it will take is a shake and they'll all fall. And they'll fall into the mouth of the devourer. Verse 13.

Your troops, your mighty army, your military that had the world cairing before you. Well, it's as if your mighty military are like women. Modern ears would take issue with Nahum's choice of expression, but he's saying instead of your troops being battle-hardened as strong as can be, they are instead those who shouldn't be on the battlefield at all.

If your mighty gates that were the great defense of the city, utterly daunting to breach, well, it will be as if they are wide open inviting invaders in.

Come right in. Make yourself at home. Because the Lord's fire will devour your bars.

Verse 14. Go on, Assyria, make all preparations, get everything in line, draw up your best battle plan, get the water, get the supplies, strengthen your forts, get to work with repairs, put all of your graft and genius together and get ready.

Verse 15. But as you do, the fire will devour you. The sword will cut you off and devour you like the locust.

[21 : 09] We can cobble together all the confidence we want, all the security that this world offers and affords. And do you know what the Lord says to it all? It's puny.

It's pathetic. It's puerile. Do you not comprehend who God is, Nineveh? Remember, he is mighty in power.

Chapter 1. The storm clouds are like dust kicked up from his feet. And what do you trust in? Is Sarah, you're proud because you've got a bigger gate than Thebes?

Higher walls in your fortresses? Warriors? Before we mock too quickly, aren't we tempted and quick to do the same?

Well, I'll be okay because my sins are smaller than Mr. So-and-so's. My gifts are greater than Mrs. So-and-so's. Nahum makes clear throughout that God is in a different league.

[22 : 14] The things we put confidence in that are not God himself will come to nothing at his hand. Nahum pricks the proud by undermining all that they would look to for strength.

Listen to Bob File. Assyria thinks she is above the natural order but will fall and will discover the power of the creator. This is emphasized by the imagery of the fig tree in verse 12.

Bob goes on. Plants are a particular example of the creator at work unseen in the processes of nature. Thus, Nineveh no more can set aside the creator's work than plants can.

Puny, pathetic, and puerile. That's what all these means of earthly confidence are when faced with almighty God. So, Nineveh, what have you got?

Well, to the locusts. The word for grasshopper used here is another type of locust used elsewhere in the Bible as something like a swarming locust. And notice how Nahum uses the image of the locust throughout.

[23 : 28] He's saying that your whole quest for expansion, Nineveh, your quest for domination and wealth and power is the very thing that has undermined you and will destroy you.

Verse 15, you multiply thirsting after a larger empire. Verse 16, you have as many merchants as the stars of the heavens devoted to accruing wealth.

But all that wealth and luxury on the day of trouble, well, the merchants aren't going to stick around. Off they'll fly like the locusts, taking all the wealth with them, thundering you like a swarm of locusts.

Verse 17, the princes, the scribes, oh yes, they'll be around in the good times. When it's cold, as the locusts like it, oh, they'll be there, they'll take it in, they'll enjoy all that can be offered.

But when the sun rises, when the day of trouble comes, they'll be off to you. Verse 18, your shepherds, your kings, they'll be preoccupied, complacent in their slumber, and so there'll be no leaders to protect the people.

[24 : 39] There'll be a great scattering. When the day of trouble comes, what will happen? The sheer size of your empire, its greed will be a problem. Assyria, in all your pride, you've made for yourself swarms and swarms of locusts that will strip you dry.

answer the rhetorical question in these verses. Verse 17, where are they? Where is all that you've strived for and built and sought after, put your confidence in?

They're gone. And not only are they gone, not only have they gone, but they've bled you dry. sin is not just something that deserves judgment as if its effects and consequences will only be seen and felt and dealt with at the last day.

No, sin is itself destructive. It starts with dabbling in something before being taken up with it, before being taken over by it, before being stripped bare by it.

Paul tells us in Romans 1 that the immediate judgment for sin can be that God gives people up to the fullness of their desires. Nahum says that a serious pride, their quest for dominance, will leave them with glass feet.

[26 : 06] We see the same things today, don't we? Think of the various champions that there have been for gay rights and feminism. One day a hero of a cause, and the next day an enemy.

No longer progressive enough. unbeknownst, or perhaps by setting their sights unashamedly on children. Who knows whether that might be the progressive agenda's undoing, as many normal parents arise to the cause to resist such illicit and unhelpful and evil influences on their children.

Or think of the power grab that happened during COVID, where a select few seized the opportunity to grasp more power, to take more limelight, only to be completely undone by their own measures, hosted by their own petards.

Or think of the faithful spouse who's caught up and caught out by their own desire, and in the end their whole life unravels and falls apart over a night or two with Lady Folly.

Or the young man, set and earning a fortune, who becomes consumed with greed and envy, and it's his end. And a hundred other examples besides. Very often, the worldly things we chase are both the cause and the means of our undoing.

[27 : 30] Nahum makes clear that the Lord pricks our pride. Now, as he does so, notice that he started, verse 12, with Nineveh's fortresses.

That's what they put their confidence in, their strength in, their trust in. But there is a fortress that brings refuge from the devouring fire and locust.

And the fortress that can have confidence put in it is letting go of all worldly confidences, and instead, chapter 1, verse 7, looking to the Lord who is good and is a stronghold, a fortress, but this time a stronghold and a fortress that promises and delivers security and salvation.

The one refuge, the one thing we can trust and that will deliver is coming with the empty hands of faith to the Lord God who's slow to anger and who through the Lord Jesus has made provision that those he knows will be pardoned, rescued.

And so the question comes to all, to those who seek to do evil, those who squash the Lord's people, those who disregard and disgrace the Lord, but also to us gathered here, with all that you shape your life around, with all that you've invested in and sought to do and trusted, on the day of trouble, where are they?

[29 : 15] Is it a fortress of ripe figs ready to be devoured? Or is it the stronghold that stands in the day of trouble? Is it the Lord who's good? Will you be found to be his friend or his enemy?

The Lord pricks the pride, but finally we see Nahum rising, raising, rejoicing. We see that Nahum rises rejoicing, verse 19.

God's acting injustice is the good news the world truly needs. Nineveh will be undone, its end is set, verse 19, there will be no easing the hurt, for the wind is grievous, it's fatal.

And look once again at the response. There's clapping. clapping everywhere. All who hear this news clap, they celebrate. It's news of comfort.

There is, of course, a fine balance to be struck between a gloating that exhibits pride and a genuine joy in seeing God deal with evil.

[30 : 27] Assyria's evil was truly terrible, and their end was good news for all. God, in his power and might and justice, moved to deal with a dark and oppressive evil.

So much so that it was good news for all. Obvious that it was truly just. And we can be sure that God doesn't change. We sang a version of Psalm 97 earlier in the service.

Listen to the words of that psalm. The Lord reigns. Let the earth rejoice. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes up before him, burns up his adversities all around.

The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the people see his glory. Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice. Why?

Because of your judgments, O Lord. Lord. He preserves the lives of his saints. He delivers them from the hand of the wicked. The Lord's people have always sung songs of rejoicing at God's great justice, because God hates evil.

[31 : 41] He hates oppression more than anyone else. They've sung songs like that because God's judgment of evil brings salvation for those who take refuge in him.

and they sing songs of rejoicing because God is the one who will deal with evil, all evil. And so what hope is there in the face of any and all injustice in this world?

Who hears the cry of the aborted baby? Who hears the shrieking parents being stripped of their children because they won't let them be mutilated in the name of progress?

Who sees the bloodied faces of the Christian pastors beaten up in India? Who sees the despair that comes from the Christian who loses their job because of their faith? Who witnesses the church attenders thrown into prison in Iran?

Who witnesses the bullying and loneliness and scorn that befalls the young Christian student who cherishes God above all else? The hope is that our good God reigns and one day we'll make an end of all that's evil.

[32 : 54] He hears, he sees, he witnesses and his judgment is certain and his judgment is just and his judgment is good and his judgment will bring joy and relief to those who trust in God and to those who've known great travails.

Now, both Nahum and Jonah end with rhetorical questions. I think they are probably the only two books in the Bible that end like that.

And the questions at the end of both of these books about Nineveh get to the heart of the matter. In Jonah, God asks, should I not pity Nineveh?

Should I not practice long suffering with them? Should I not show grace and patience to those who require it? Should I not spare the repentant? He does.

God truly does show grace and patience to all manner of people and nations. We all know that here, don't we? That's the case, that that's what he does.

[34 : 02] And we're thankful for it. For he's been terribly gracious to us. Nahum 1, verse 3, God is slow to anger. And Jonah makes that abundantly clear.

He speaks words of warning. He gives opportunity after opportunity to people so they can turn to him, so they can seek refuge in him.

But also, Nahum 1, verse 3, he will by no means clear the guilty. And so Nahum's rhetorical question at the end. Upon whom has not come your unceasing, your continual evil?

It has fallen on all and it has fallen off in. That word unceasing or continual is a word often used to describe things relating to God's grace.

In Leviticus, the fire on the altar for the burnt offering, for atonement, the fire was to burn continually, unceasingly. It was not to go out to cut off the possibility of atonement.

[35 : 10] In Numbers, the cloud and the fire over the tabernacle, it was there continually, unceasingly, to show that God was present, guiding them. And so I think Nahum is making it doubly pointed here.

It isn't just that Nineveh's sin, that their king, Ashurbanipal's sin, was continual and far-reaching. It's that it was continual despite God's grace being continual, his patience being continual.

That is what ultimately shames and condemns. Despite receiving great patience, despite having received grace previously, Assyria and her kings continually rebelled, continually did evil.

And so there was great rejoicing at their downfall. God was absolutely right to judge them. There comes a time when evil will no longer be tolerated.

So Jonah shows that God is gracious and patient and will relent for those who repent. And that is good news. And Nahum shows that God is just and will ultimately take evil, sin, and injustice very seriously and will not let it pass by.

[36 : 27] And that is good news too. And so Nahum, in verse 19, finishes with universal rejoicing. All that stands against God will be dealt with.

But we do well to heed his rhetorical questions. Are you better than Thebes? Are you better than judgment? Are you above it? The same question comes to all who oppose the Lord?

Are you better than Thebes? Do you think you're beyond judgment? The question comes to us, where are they? In the day of trouble, what will come of all that you put your trust in?

What will those things do for you on that day? And finally, upon whom has not come your unceasing evil, won't God be seen to be glorious and rejoice then for dealing with evil?

Who won't rejoice when all evils are brought to justice? And so Nahum comes to the Lord's people with great comfort for our day, as well as his day.

[37 : 44] The things that distress us and depress us about the state of our world, the prevalence of evil, God is not indifferent to that. He is not indifferent to the struggles of his people. He'll deal with it.

Oh, be sure that he'll deal with it. There is a coming day where all the Lord's people will rejoice. when he deals with these things finally.

And whilst Nahum's questions caution us against gloating, he also makes clear that we oughtn't to feel guilty for longing that God will deal with sin. He'll deal with the sin and evil that blights our experience.

Our good God reigns and one day he will make an end of all that's evil to the praise of his glory. and to the comfort and salvation of his people. Let's pray.

Lord God, we pray that you would steal us for the days we are in. Grant us all that we need that we may rest in you. help us to trust that vengeance is yours and you will repay.

[39 : 06] And so help us to be faithful until the day we rejoice finally in your justice. And we ask for your help in Jesus' name. Amen.