

The Good God of Vengeance

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Date: 18 June 2023

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[0 : 00] hear more. We're going to turn to our Bibles now, to our reading for this evening, and Josh is going to be starting a short series in the prophet Nahum. Now, Nahum is one of those tricky-to-find books, but you'll find it stuck between Micah and Habakkuk towards the end of the Old Testament. It's one of the so-called minor prophets, but that doesn't mean that they're minor in stature, of course, only that they're shorter than people like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Nothing minor about the message. Nahum is speaking God's word of justice and judgment upon the very powerful world power of the day, a very cruel, brutal empire, the Assyrian empire, whose capital was in Nineveh. You know of Nineveh because of the famous prophecy of Jonah. Jonah, about a hundred years before, had gone to Nineveh, called the people to repent, and they did. Here we are a century later, and it's a very different picture. They are unrepentant. They are brutal.

They are dominating that part of the world. And Nahum is the prophet of God, speaking to God's people, but speaking about how God views this situation. So we're going to read just the first eight verses of Nahum chapter 1. An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God. The Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries and keeps wrath for His enemies. The Lord is slow to anger, great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet.

He rebukes the sea. It makes it dry. He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither. The bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before Him. The hills melt. The earth heaves before Him.

The world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the heat of His anger?

[2 : 43] His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken in pieces by Him. The Lord is good. A stronghold in the day of trouble. He knows those who take refuge in Him.

But with an overflowing flood, He will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue His enemies into darkness.

Amen. May God bless us. This is His Word, solemn as it is. A Word of judgment. Amen. We'll do turn once again to Nahum and follow along.

There is great security in God's character. Nahum is a book all about judgment, yet it is a book that was written to bring comfort.

Nahum is a book that enlarges our understanding of God's character, but it does so in a way that is perhaps not very palatable for everyone.

[4 : 09] I've been asking around over the past month or so as to how many people have ever heard the book of Nahum preached, and of the 20 or so folks that have asked, every single person has said, I've never heard it preached.

In fact, at least one commentator and scholar has said that all Scripture is the Word of God, perhaps with the exception of Nahum. Of course, we know that isn't true, but it betrays the unease some people have regarding God as judge.

The whole of Nahum is a prolonged vision of judgment. It's poetic, it's beautifully crafted, and it's crystal clear in pronouncing judgment.

There's no deviation from the theme. Nahum, three chastening chapters declaring that God is against Assyria, and that his judgment will be irresistible.

Nahum's message is, Nineveh, time is up. The end is nigh. And as Nahum unpacks the ferocity of judgment that will fall in Nineveh, which was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, he does so for

the benefit of the people of God.

[5 : 27] He makes plain that God is sovereign in salvation and judgment, and those two things are very tightly bind together. Now, before we get into the detail of the verses we've read, it's important to set the scene a little bit, much like in reading an epistle and reading a prophet, it's helpful to have some understanding of the historical context.

And so, as we begin, we're going to look at just very three brief, three very brief things about the historical setting. First, Nineveh's history. Then what was happening when Nahum wrote the book, and then finally, who was Nahum?

Nahum's history is a grim history. Back in Genesis 10, we see Nineveh was one of the cities built by Nimrod. He was a tyrant in the cursed line of Ham.

A bad start. And as Willie's already said, Nineveh is best known for its appearance in the prophet Juna. Juna eventually and reluctantly went to preach a message of judgment to Nineveh over a hundred years before Nahum did.

God had already said that Nineveh would be destroyed for its wickedness. He declared, yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown. On that occasion, God's word, as it is wont to do, brought about repentance in Nineveh, and they were spared.

[6 : 53] But in history, God had orchestrated Assyria to be the means of his own judgment against Israel in the north. And at the time, Israel were the great superpower of the day, a military juggernaut, an empire that encompassed much of modern-day Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon, and also parts of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

It was massive, and it was mighty. And Nineveh, that was the crown jewel of the empire, the capital city, and the greatest city in the world.

Juna tells us it would take three days to walk the breadth of it. And Assyria were very bad news for the Lord's people. They'd already conquered and deported Israel in the north.

And Judah, in the south, under the reins of Ahaz and Manasseh, were a vassal state to Assyria, subservient to them. And that was still the case in Nahum's time.

Assyria, having once been God's tool of judgment, were for a long time known for being barbaric, wicked, and full of hubris. If you have time later on, you could read Isaiah 10, to see something of the evil pride and destructive incentive that characterized Assyria.

[8 : 20] But we can be sure that in the 7th century BC, the era of Nahum's ministry, the Lord's people in Judah carried a heavy yoke under the rule of the Assyrian empire, Ashurbanipal.

Well, what was happening exactly when Nahum wrote this book? Assyria were likely at the very peak of their powers. They had taken Egypt and conquered Phoenicia, as we see in chapter 3, verse 8.

That happened around 663 BC. And chapter 1, verse 12, well, that tells us that Assyria were at full strength.

It was at their very peak when Nahum was ministering. So Nahum's prophecy in its day would have seemed unbelievable. The greatest superpower at the very peak of its power.

And here comes a prophet who's little known, and he proclaims very pointedly the destruction of Nineveh and the end of an empire. We know now that Nineveh was overthrown in about 612 BC.

[9 : 31] And so in all likelihood, Nahum was probably ministering during the teal end of the reign of Manasseh or during good King Josiah's reign. Both times when there was reform in Judah and the Lord's people were restored to worship.

Finally, who was Nahum? We know very little about him, little more than what we read in verse 1. An oracle concerning Nineveh, the book of the vision of Nahum, of Elkosh.

It is worth noting, though, in verse 1 that the word oracle can be translated burden. And that's a fitting word for what Nahum teaches. This is a burden about Nineveh.

And indeed, a message of judgment should always be burdensome. But perhaps the key to the whole book is Nahum's own name. Nahum literally means comfort.

Comfort. And that's what this book is. It is a very pointed message of judgment upon God's enemies and his people's enemies, which was also a message of salvation for his own people.

[10 : 43] A message of comfort that our good God reigns and will one day make an end of all that is evil. And so Nahum begins his prophecy with a psalm in verses 2 to 8 all about the Lord.

And the first thing we see in verses 2 to 3 is the severity of his character. The severity of his character. God is not to be trifled with. Endless evil and persistent pride and presumption will be

judged.

Notice where Nahum starts in all of this. It isn't at God's actions. He begins with God's very character.

God's judgment isn't an unfortunate add-on to God. It isn't a kind of aside or an inferior aspect of who he is and what he does. Look at verse 2.

It gives us two things about God's character. The Lord is a jealous and avenging God. The Lord is a jealous God. The shadow of Exodus hangs all over these verses saying that God is a jealous God harks back to two key junctures in the Exodus story.

[12:06] The first of those the giving of the Ten Commandments where no idols are to be made or worshipped because God is a jealous God. God and then later just after the golden calf the same thing is reiterated.

God's jealousy is deeply related to his covenant. God is jealous for his name and for his people. Now God's jealousy isn't like the jealousy we're prone to have. It's not the kind of jealousy that longs for a car or a spouse or a job or a house that we don't have and would like to have.

It isn't the sort of jealousy that corrupts a person. Not at all. Notice verses two and three all three out. As Nahum mentions the Lord he does so using his covenant name Yahweh.

In our Bibles it's the Lord in capitals. He uses it five times. The covenant name of God. the name that God's people came to know as they were rescued from Egypt so that they could sing Yahweh is a man of war.

[13:16] Yahweh is his name. God is jealous for his own name. He's zealous to maintain his perfect justice and righteousness but he is also jealous for his own people for that's what they are.

Those whom Nahum was prophesying to were the Lord's people. Those whom God had said were his treasured possession. Those he'd rescued from Egypt that they might worship him.

God is jealous to maintain his covenant relationship when that is threatened he acts in jealousy.

When he isn't worshipped as he ought to be whether by his own people neglecting him or by others constraining his people from being able to worship him then he acts.

His commitment to his covenant is unshakable and God is not fickle and flippant with his jealousy.

We can rest assured that when his name is threatened or his covenant people are threatened we don't need to guess whether he'll take that seriously.

he always will. Nahum makes clear that the Lord is jealous but secondly in verse two he says the Lord is an avenging God.

[14:43] We're very familiar with referring to God as holy, holy, holy. We sing it in hymns. We get that God is holy. We're happy to say that. But look at what Nahum says three times.

The Lord is an avenging God. The Lord is avenging. The Lord takes vengeance. That might not make such a palatable hymn.

Nonetheless it is a good truth about God. His jealousy will be seen in him taking vengeance. God's wrath isn't random.

It isn't spiteful. It doesn't come by chance or by surprise. No. It will be brought to bear on his enemies. When God is mocked, when his people are trampled and tyrannized and tormented, then his very character cannot allow such things to stand.

Those who set themselves against God proudly, obstinately, definitely, they make themselves God's enemies. And there's only vengeance there.

[15:57] When Assyria continued to keep Judah down, to demand its soldiers, to demand its allegiance, to thrust its idols upon Judah, God was not indifferent to that.

Justice must be done. And God has not changed for us today. God won't be mocked. God's love. When a mockery is made of his name and his image, when his people are coerced and cajoled and compelled to bow the knee and worship to something other than him, to bow the knee to the flag of the day or the month, to bow the knee to the latest man-made ideal that kicks against God, he isn't indifferent to that.

When those who set themselves against God and set themselves against his people and try to squeeze the life and the faith out of them, try to take away their livelihoods and their reputations and their relationships, God is not indifferent to that.

Maybe some of us here have been on the receiving end of great vitriol in school, at work. Maybe some kind of us have had all kinds of colleagues and acquaintances or friends or perhaps even family.

[17 : 14] who have made it their mission to grind you down so they can dispose of your faith, to pile misery upon you until you relent. God is not indifferent to that.

He is an avenger. He is jealous. He will not let that stand. Now, verse 3, Nahum also says, the Lord is slow to anger.

Perhaps the talk of unrelenting and inevitable judgment upon Nineveh prompts an indignation in some. Why does God's wrath have to be so ferocious? Why such strong judgment?

Where is God's love and grace? Well, God's judgment is always set in the context of his enduring patience and forbearance. God's love and if any city on earth ought to know such things, it was Nineveh.

The Lord is slow to anger and so he sent Jonah and when Nineveh repented and sat cloth and ashes, God relented of the disaster he'd spoken of. The Lord is slow to anger and only with the passing of over a hundred years does God return to deal with the awful Assyrians.

[18 : 39] Assyria had repented but they returned to their cruel and crushing ways. They returned to their lust for power to conquer and crush and subjugate more and more and more.

No line was too far for them to cross. We should at this point make a note that the repentance of a previous generation is no guarantee of the repentance of a future one.

James Phillips says very penetratingly it is perhaps significant that so far from thinking of God as swift and strong in judgment the Old Testament itself is rather puzzled and perplexed at his seemingly interminable delay in avenging wrong and wickedness in the heathen nations.

Isn't that somewhat different to how we perceive judgment? the Old Testament cries out why has it not happened? Now whilst there is no place for flippancy about judgment there is today I think a squeamishness about it.

We're told we mustn't judge anyone else for their identity and choices. We're rebuked for any mention or notion that the God of the Bible might in any way judge. Even atheists want to silence any mention of hell or any murmur that God might judge them.

[20 : 07] We belong to a society that abhors judgment and trumpets everyone's right to be who they are or to be who they think they are. We belong to a society that wants to make tolerance of all kinds of perversions the credo of polite society and so judgment has no place.

But we mustn't let them rob us of the wonder of our God who is to be feared loved and trusted all at the same time.

We mustn't let them rob us of the Lord who is a man of war but who will also not put out a smoldering wick. Now Nahum quotes in verse 3 from Exodus chapter 34.

And we read in Exodus 34, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by new means clear the guilty.

You can see where Nahum's quoting from, but notice what Nahum leaves out. He leaves out all but two phrases, the two phrases that were so pertinent to Nineveh.

[21 : 35] The Lord is slow to anger and he will by new means clear the guilty. Nahum's message is plain. The time of grace and mercy for Nineveh is over.

There is no steadfast love for those who set themselves up as enemies of God. In such instances, we are assured that the Lord is slow to anger and that he will by new means clear the guilty.

But Nahum adds something. Verse 3, The Lord is slow to anger and great in power. The message is clear.

God's patience doesn't last forever. We might sometimes wish that God might intervene sooner. We might long that he would end the slide towards more and more evil that our country set on.

We might pray that God would ease the burden set on us by others. That he might strike down those who perpetually hit the moral horrors of our day. God isn't indifferent to these things and his forbearance shouldn't be taken as indifference.

[22 : 41] It's a wondrous thing for us that he slow to anger. He gives any and all of us ample opportunity to turn away from disaster and turn to him. But there comes a time when justice will be done.

When judgment will be enacted. When presumption will be met with disaster. We mustn't mistake God's patience for indifference. But it is a mistake too for anyone to mistake God's patience for him being passive or for him not being present.

Peter in his second epistle says scoffers will come and they will say where is the promise of his coming? Forever since the fathers fell asleep all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.

No judgments coming. Carry on as you like. There will be no consequences. Do as you see fit. But Peter made clear that fire was being stored up for a day of judgment.

The Lord is jealous and avenging. The Lord is slow to anger. Both of these are true. And when he is patient beyond what we deem reasonable, we do well to remember that to the Lord a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.

[24 : 05] But we do well to remember too that he is great in power and he will by no means clear the guilty. A day of reckoning will always come.

Well that is God's character. But secondly, Nahum makes clear that God is supreme over his creation. He's supreme over his creation.

creation. And we see that from the second part of verse three through to verse six. The Lord can deal with the great evils of the world because the very fabric of creation bends to his will and purposes.

Nahum began with the severity of God's character. He's not to be trifled with. The world we inhabit is ruled by a God who takes justice seriously. His character cannot tolerate unrighteousness. unrighteousness. But more than God just being positioned in opposition to evil, God is powerful to obliterate evil. Verse three, his way is whirlwind and storm.

[25 : 15] When he wants to move against something, he moves the heavens. When I was preparing on Friday, all of a sudden the sunshine turned to thunderstorm and the thunder was roaring.

lightning and there were great flashes of lightning. Isn't the thunderous sky frightening and awesome? It really brings perspective to how small we are.

God's way is in whirlwind and storm and the clouds are the dust of his feet. Think about that for a moment. As we walk along outside in the streets, a bit of dust is kicked up, it's disturbed, our shoes pick up a bit of dirt.

The ends of our trousers perhaps collect a little bit of dust and dirt. By comparison, it is as if the dust of the Lord's feet are the thunderous clouds that darken the world.

How humbling an image is that? The mad clouds of a thunderstorm are just the dust that's disturbed when the Lord takes a step. Well, how much more awesome than one taking the steps.

[26 : 32] Verse 4, the Lord rebukes the sea and makes it dry. He dries up all the rivers. Again, there's nothing quite like the sea to help us realize how small and dependent we are.

Yet the Lord can speak and make them desert. desert. There could be another echo of Exodus here with the parting of the Red Sea.

Or it could be, in Nahum saying this, that it's part of the threat to Nineveh. That God could dry out the river and the moat that flowed around the city as part of its seemingly impregnable defense. That he's going to dry it out, reduce their defenses to nothing. But perhaps it's enough to say that the sea is a picture of unruliness. It's untamable.

That is, unless you're God. And his control isn't just of the stormy skies and the raging waters. He can also make even Bashan and Carmel wither in the bloom of Lebanon.

[27 : 40] I think Nahum's making a double point here. These three areas located in the northern kingdom of Israel were famous for their fruitfulness and their fertility.

They were a picture, a symbol of lush abundance. Lebanon was most famous for its cedar trees. But even they, with their deep roots, would wither alongside Bashan and Carmel.

But perhaps the second point Nahum makes here is that if God would bring such devastation upon his own promised land, why would he not even more bring it on Nineveh?

Verse 5, the mountains quake before him, the hills melt away, the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. The very structure of the world will be shaken.

Meltered away like a pile of snow. Mountains and hills shaking and melting away.

[28 : 48] A great picture of God's power. But perhaps more pointedly, the waters and the mountains were the places that the ancient religions thought that their gods lived. And at God's appearing, at his will, at his rebuke, when he moves in judgment, the very foundation of the earth melts away with all of their false idols.

And so with all this comes the question, verse 6, who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? Nobody can.

What hope have Assyria? What hope have Nineveh? What can shields and spears and chariots and captains and moats and men do in the face of Almighty God, the creator and sustainer of the whole of creation, the one who by the blast of his nostrils eradicated Pharaoh's army?

What matches the hubris of humanity for God the warrior? What matches man for the one who melts mountains? God is supreme over his creation.

And there are two implications from this. What Nahum is saying is bigger than just Nineveh. This great psalm of God's power over creation shows his utter control of the most terrifying and fundamental forces and foundations of nature.

[30 : 21] This is about more than just Nineveh and Assyria. This speaks to the whole composition of the world. The whole fabric of creation.

God's character coupled with his control of creation means that no enemy can stand. That no enemy will stand. Nineveh faced its day of reckoning.

We knew that now. But the recipients of this book would have been bemused at the prospect. The power of the day. Suddenly overthrown. It must have seemed impossible.

And there are all kinds of things that we can look at and think it's impossible. Who hasn't thought that Scotland is in a hopeless state. Drifting further and further away.

Who hasn't thought there's no way for it to be brought back to truth and righteousness. Who hasn't thought that the dangerous trans agenda is going to plough on unfettered wreaking havoc on children for generations.

[31 : 30] How can it be stopped? Who hasn't felt powerless at times. The rise of false religions. Religions like Islam.

And others. And our land that are growing and surging. Who hasn't wept at the countless lives ended in the womb and thought this will never stop.

Nobody cares. It's impossible. God's character and his control of creation mean that no such thing is too tall a task.

If mountains can quake and melt at the Lord's jealousy. If mountains shake when his vengeance is let loose. Then wicked laws on the statute book can be melted away and erased too.

If the most fruitful of pastures the oldest most deeply rooted trees can be made to wither then so too can disastrous ideologies be made to wither.

[32 : 37] Nahum's God is our God. His character is still the same. He still super intends creation. Second implication.

Nineveh's destruction was a real judgment in history. But that judgment is but a shadow of the judgment to come. There are all kinds of pictures in these verses that are picked up in the New Testament's explanation of the last day.

We saw verse 3. The Lord coming in clouds. Well think of the words of the two men in Acts as Jesus ascended to heaven in a cloud.

They said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? Then this Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

He will come in the clouds. Paul speaks of the Lord's people being lifted up to meet him in the clouds. Verse 6. Who can stand at his indignation?

[33 : 41] Words picked up in Revelation 6. Verse 6. At the great day of their wrath, who can stand? Verse 6 again. His wrath is poured out like fire.

Peter speaks of the certainty of the judgment that is to come, the judgment that the scoffers deny. And he says it's coming in fire. And he speaks of the melting away of heaven and earth.

God can and does intervene in history. There comes a point when his patience runs out. And so whether we see in our lives such an intervention or not, we can still be sure that he will unmistakably put all wrongs right at the climax of history, at the great day of judgment.

The terrible day of his judgment is coming, it's certain. And on that day, all those who set themselves against the Lord and his people, no matter how powerful they look now, all those who've hardened themselves to the truth, who scorn God's grace, all those who pushed evil and participated with evil, will not stand.

Nineveh's time had run out, but God's patience before the last great day of judgment is still here.

His word calls out now for people to turn to him, to see looming an inevitable judgment and to run to

him for safety.

[35 : 16] It isn't too late. And finally, in verses 7 and 8, Nahum makes clear the security of God's covenant, the security of God's covenant.

God's might and character are given to fulfilling his covenant with his people. God's jealousy is shaped and framed by his covenant.

His jealousy isn't petty. It's concerned with the proper relationship between covenant lords and covenant people. And so Nahum's great oracle, his burden of judgment on Nineveh, is at the same time an oracle of comfort for the Lord's people.

God's vengeance is covenantal. He acts to preserve his people because, verse 7, because the Lord is good.

The Lord is good. He doesn't just do good. It isn't that he was good or that he can be good or that he will be good.

[36 : 23] The Lord is good. Nahum, in verse 7, isn't writing a separate book here.

He hasn't gone off topic. This isn't a change of tact. God's goodness isn't separate from his judgment. God's judgment upon evil and his enemies is good for his people.

The gospel. The gospel is the declaration of the good news of God's victory in battle for his people and the defeat of his enemies.

Those things go together. And so God's vengeance is utterly right. He is slow to it, but is absolutely right and justified in it. And so his judgment of wickedness and evil is good.

It's good for you and it's good for me. If someone brutally and intentionally murdered someone dear to me without remorse and wished to do it again, but the judge sentences them with the full weight of the law, with the strictest, reliable penalty, it would be impossible to say anything other than such a judge is a good judge.

[37 : 42] But God's goodness isn't cold and aloof like an unknown judge. Verse 7, he is a stronghold, a fortress, a rock in the day of trouble for his people.

To those who come to him, to those who belong to him, there's no need to fear his vengeance. And there's no need to be overawed by all that assails us.

Because the Lord's character and his almighty power over creation are not to us a certain prospect of punishment, but a comforting promise of protection.

all the might of God that Nahum unpacks is not against his people. It's for them.

Verse 7, God knows those who take refuge in him. He knows those who take refuge in him. There could be a double meaning in God knowing.

[38 : 49] It could be that he knows those who really do take refuge in him. He's aware. If you cling on to God, if you put your trust in him, he knows. He won't miss it. But God's knowing is more than that.

It speaks of his deep covenant relationship. The last words of Exodus chapter 2, during those many days, the king of Egypt died and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help.

Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. God heard their groaning. He remembered his covenant. God saw the people of Israel and God knew.

And so he rescued them. Or Paul in Corinthians makes clear there's one knowledge that really counts. If anyone loves God, he's known by God.

Friends, we mustn't minimize the reality of God's judgment. It is terrifying. It's real. But for those who belong to the Lord, it will see all wrongs put right.

[40 : 02] And it isn't something for us to fear. Taking refuge in God is taking refuge in the stronghold of strongholds.

But verse 8, those who don't, those who persistently disobey, disregard, and disavoy him, well then, it is an overflowing flood.

That is Nahum saying to Nineveh that what you sow you will reap. Isaiah described Assyria and its mighty army as an overflowing flood that was coming for Judah.

But here the flood will be turned around and will sweep Nineveh away. Dread judgment was coming. I don't think the persecuted church would be squeamish about Nahum.

When Willie, our senior minister, was speaking at a conference for some of our ministry partners in Asia, the leader of the conference asked those who had been beaten up in the past year for going to church to put their hands up.

[41 : 11] And half of a room of 500 people did. Those who are beaten up for going to church week after week. Those who are tortured and imprisoned because of Jesus.

Those who have all of their existence pulled apart for belonging to Jesus. I wonder if they'd read these words and be filled with tears.

Because theirs is a God who takes vengeance upon evil. vengeance upon his enemies. I wonder if they would read and get to verse 7 and weep for joy that they have a good God of vengeance.

And I wonder if perhaps one reason this book isn't often preached in the West is because we've grown accustomed to the comfort of Christendom. But those days have passed.

Hard days have begun. But grasping God's character and all of it and grasping his control of creation will be a great comfort for us in the days ahead.

[42 : 26] For Nahum makes clear our good God reigns and one day he will make an end of all that is evil. let's pray.

Our good heavenly Father we come to you asking that you wouldn't let our faith be shaken. Grant us the grace and the faith to know you clearly and to love you dearly.

let us not settle for faith that only glimmers some truth of you but instead grant us your help that we would know you for the stronghold and refuge that you are.

And we ask for your help in these things in Jesus name Amen.