

Deeply Personal Judgement

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[0 : 01] We're going to turn now to our Bibles, and we are, if you've been here the last few weeks, you'll know that we are in the prophet Nahum, which is stuck in there between Micah and Habakkuk, if you are having difficulty finding it, towards the end, just near the very end of the Old Testament, among what we call the minor prophets, not because they're minor in stature, but just because they are shorter compared to the likes of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and so on.

And we've been looking for a couple of weeks at the prophet Nahum, and it is, I think it's fair to say, a fairly grim message. It's a message of judgment.

God is speaking through his prophet a word of judgment against the mighty empire of the day, the world empire, a huge empire dominating the known world, and that is the empire of Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh.

And we're going to read from chapter 2, verse 3, through to chapter 3, verse 7. And the Lord says through his prophet, 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.

[1 : 37] 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 open. The palace melts away. Its mistress is stripped. She's carried off. Her slave girl is 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's no end of the treasure 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 lion's den? The feeding place of the young lions. Where the lion and lioness went. Where his cubs were with none to disturb.

[2 : 35] The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lioness. 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. Woe to the bloody city. All full of lies and plunder.

No end to the prey. The crack of the whip and the 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.

[3 : 35] Graceful. And of deadly charms. Who betrays nations with their whorings. And peoples with their 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? Amen. And may God bless us.

His word. We'll do open once again to Nahum chapter 2. Is there anything more terrifying or fearful than receiving from God exactly what is deserved?

[4 : 50] Nahum pictures judgment. Thoroughly deserved judgment. Thoroughly deserved judgment. And the vividness of his depiction ought to stir the people of God.

Stir the people of God. That we will see justice done in the end. That no evil will be left unpunished. Stir the Lord's people. That God is not indifferent.

To all kinds of wickedness that falls upon them. But also to stir them. But also to stir them. To not take the Lord lightly. To not be proud.

Presumptuous. For the perceptive Judaite hearing this. They would recognize that a similar fate would befall them. Were it not for the Lord.

For how was it after all that they came to be in their present strife at the hands of the Assyrians? It was by the hand of God. Bringing covenant curses for disobedience.

[5 : 52] And so there isn't any room for pride. As this judgment is declared. When we're confronted by God's character as we are in Nahum. It is either the stench of death.

Or the aroma of life. It's worth noting that in a book about judgment. God's character is prominent. And he is close to and participates in all that is described.

And that's brought into absolute prominence in our passage this evening. Now we've been seeing that Nahum's message is singular. And so all he says holds together as one.

At different points in this book. He deals with why judgment comes. That it is coming. What it looks like. Its impact. And that it is a comfort for those who belong to the Lord and are oppressed.

But remember where we started. And how essential it is to see that God's very character. Is the reason for the judgment that Nahum describes. Back in chapter 1 verse 2.

[6 : 58] God is jealous. Reference to Exodus. Jealous for his name. His people. And God is avenging. 1.3. God is slow to anger.

As he has been with Nineveh. First sending Jonah. The prophet who brought redemption to them. Before now sending Nahum. Who brings ruin. But God has been slow to anger.

Toward his own people too. And chapter 1 verse 3 again. God will by no means clear the guilty. And so Nahum throughout his book holds together the ideas of judgment and salvation.

As two sides of the same thing. And it is important for us to see this in perspective. When God's judgment can have such starkly contrasting outcomes. One needs to be clear about what sees one person face judgment.

And with it doom. And what sees another person face judgment and with it deliverance. And the answer to that is all to do with what we do with God.

[8 : 05] Nineveh set themselves against the Lord and against his people. And so they face the bleakest of futures. Nahum focuses on two things in our passage. Before a concluding remark for each one.

So first he deals with what judgment looks like in verses 2 to 12. And then in verse 13 we have a behold concluding statement. And then at chapter 3 verses 1 to 4 he deals with the sin that is made plain.

That is judged. And then again he concludes 3, 5. Behold. And with a strong statement to follow. And so let's look at the first of these.

Verses 2 to 13. Nahum pictures irresistible judgment. Irresistible judgment pictured.

Verses 3 to 13. To be on the receiving end of God's terrible judgment is to face the total and complete loss of everything.

And there's no stopping it. We're now brought into the battle scene. And Nahum makes clear that the judgment is utterly thorough. There'll be no escaping it.

[9 : 17] There's no defense against it. There's no hiding from it. There's no remains after it. And all that once was will be no more. Verses 3 to 4. Make clear that there'll be no escaping God's judgment once it falls.

Nineveh will be faced with an intimidating foe. Verse 3. The mighty men line up. Their battle color is red. Here come soldiers marching for Nineveh who are literally marked with blood.

Shields and clothing dripping in it. Battle dress that's designed to intimidate. The chariots shimmer with readiness. Verse 4. The chariots charge around seemingly everywhere.

Active, rapid, menacing. No escape from them. It's a picture of irresistible military might.

There is no escape from God's judgment. Once it comes for you. It's fearsome and overpowering. But also verse 5. There's no defense.

[10 : 22] Nineveh already have swarms of invaders upon them before the king remembers. Oh, my officers. They'll need instructions. Oh, of course I've got officers. God's judgment causes people to be dumbfounded at the prospect of the destruction that's arrived.

And even when the king gets round to ordering his men, all it leads to is stumbling. And then suddenly the siege tires up and the flood of soldiers is pouring into the city.

When God's sword of judgment falls, it will catch everyone off guard. And will overthrow the hardest of hearts, the hardest of defenses. Here it arrives, the flood.

Verse 6. The flood of soldiers means there's no hiding. The flood washes through the city, melting all before it. Even the security of the palace will be no security at all.

It's melted away. The river around Nineveh was long thought to be its major strength. One of the things that made it so formidable. But in the end, its strength has turned against it.

[11 : 32] History records a great flooding as Nineveh was overthrown in 612 BC. When confronted by God's judgment, all earthly strength melts away, leaving nowhere to hide.

There's no earthly security that can shelter one from God's sword of judgment. And when Nahum gets to verses 7 to 13, we begin to see that God's judgment has a very strong reap what you sow character to it.

First then in verses 7 to 10, we see that God's judgment fall. When God's judgment falls, there'll be no remains. It'll be all-encompassing, destructive, desolating, and disgracing. Verse 7, Nineveh will see its mistress dishonored, stripped, put on display, exposed to great shame.

It's hard to be sure exactly who the mistress is. Was it the queen of Nineveh? Was it some sort of Assyrian goddess? We can't be certain. But what's clear is the picture is of us stripping away of all dignity.

And then she's carried off loot from war. Just like the Assyrians did so often. Carrying off the defeated back to their own lands for their own enjoyment.

- [12 : 48] Not content to defeat their opponents. They had a rich history of humiliating them. Plundering them for all that they've got. And so they'll face the same thing.

Great turmoil, great humiliation. So that nothing is left. Verse 8, Nineveh's strength, its fullness, all the riches, the opulence, the people, the warriors, the trophies, all that it has assembled will be like a pool that has burst open.

Will go flooding out of this once great city. Running, running, running away. Halt, halt. But nothing's coming back. And so verses 9 and 10.

The great plunderers of the age will be plundered. All the riches, all the silver and gold torn away from them. What was once a limitless mountain of treasure within Nineveh.

So much had Assyria amassed from their endless conquests. It is now taken at will. Plundered as the spoils of victory. And so what is left when God's judgment falls?

- [13 : 53] Verse 10. Verse 10. Three words that build up with each other. Perhaps better read as destruction, desolation, and devastation.

When God's wrath falls. When God's wrath falls. When he moves in judgment. He does so with astonishing results. Here is a prophecy. Speaking of the wealthiest, most impressive, largest, mightiest, and most feared city in existence.

And when the Lord turns against it. Destruction. Desolation. And devastation. Amazement. Amazement. So much so that it provokes paralysis, anguish, terror.

Melting hearts, trembling knees, anguished loins. So that all faces grow pale. God's judgment is not to be taken lightly.

It cannot be outsmarted. It cannot be outrun. And it cannot be outlasted. It isn't just that the plunderers will be plundered.

- [14 : 57] But verses 11 and 12. The predators have become the prey. The kings of Assyria delighted to present themselves as lions. To carry the reputation as the mighty predator.

The fearless and feared kings. And so verse 11. They had a great den where they fed their young. Where they were undisturbed and untouched.

And they'd pile up all that they'd hunted. The lion of Nineveh. Ashurbanipal had tore enough flesh and strangled enough prey to fill high his caves. But the lion of Judah was descending.

And would smite this once fierce lion. So that the question that is left is verse 11. Where is this den? For it is no more.

Nahum paints the picture of a fearsome and irresistible defeat. Utter devastation and destruction. The crushing of Nineveh's army. Of Nineveh's spirits. Of Nineveh's wealth. Of Nineveh's pride and honor.

- [15 : 59] The crushing of all that Nineveh had made itself. But these aren't even the most fearsome things that Nahum says. For verse 13. The most earth shattering words.

Behold. I am against you. Declares the Lord of hosts. I will burn your chariots. I will cut off your prey from the earth.

And your messengers shall no longer be heard. You see this judgment is no arbitrary judgment. It's not a case of the world righting itself by one empire rising up to remove another.

These may be the means that God uses. But let it be crystal clear. I am against you. I am against you. Says the Lord of hosts. This is deeply personal judgment upon a people who have treated God's people horrifically.

Who have asserted themselves in all their might and pride as gods. Challenging Yahweh. The one true God. Nineveh weren't unlucky. They didn't catch God on a bad day.

[17 : 06] They heaped up their transgressions against God Almighty. And with hardened hearts and seared consciences persisted in opposing him and his people. And so God himself intervened.

And to make it clear that it is truly God who's behind this catastrophic defeat for Assyria. We're told that it is the Lord of hosts who declares that he's against them. Hosts.

That's a military term. The commander of the heavenly army of angels. That's who stands against Nineveh. God's the warrior at the front of his army. He's the one doing this.

And he removes everything from Nineveh. He does. He will destroy their chariots. The young warriors will be destroyed by him. He will take away the possibility of having future prey and conquests.

And no longer will their messengers go to different nations demanding loyalty, manipulating power, promising riches. Because he has ended it. Verse 13 is the conclusion of verses 3 to 12.

[18 : 12] And makes clear that God personally deals out judgment. And God's judgment is always fearful and dreadful. Now, we've been seeing that Nahum's message is a message to comfort, to comfort the Lord's people.

But this mustn't be misunderstood. Yes, his people would soon know victory over their enemies. But every judgment of God in history pictures the great day of judgment that is to come.

And Nahum's readers and us today ought not be presumptuous as we read these words. Yes, God is not indifferent to the afflictions of his people.

He's not indifferent to evil. He will deal with it. But remember chapter 1, verse 3. He will by no means clear the guilty.

And as we contemplate just how terrifying God's judgment will be, we ought to pause and reflect that the Lord is indeed jealous.

[19 : 17] His people are his people by virtue of his covenant. And that comes with it. What comes with that are demands for loyalty. His jealousy cuts against both those who oppose his people and those who pay him mere lip service.

And so whilst finding comfort in God's judgment, those who trust in the Lord will also have a sense of how seriously the Lord must be taken. He isn't to be trifled with.

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God, and so he must not be treated lightly. Lest those who rejoice today be faced with ruin tomorrow.

And so as we hear words of dire judgment upon Nineveh, as we see perhaps in our own day mighty judgments of God upon evil, we ought also to look beyond them to the great day that is to come.

For it was Jesus himself who spoke most pointedly about that day, describing it as ongoing torment, as an unquenchable fire, as a place of outer darkness where the worm does not die, and where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[20 : 31] The place from which there is no return, even to alert others. To be on the receiving end of God's terrible judgment is to face the total and complete loss of everything good, and there's no resisting it.

Nahum brings a message of utter dread for God's enemies, his enemies in Nahum's time, and his enemies who prowl on the stage of our world today, with all their agendas that undermine and oppose him.

And Nahum is a message of comfort for those under a heavy yoke, in his day and in ours. But there's a warning to you against presumption.

What a thing it would be to witness a day of such terrifying justice and destruction, but then to find that such a thing is being heaped up against you, because in being caught up in victory one day, you become complacent the next, and cease to thank God at his word.

God's judgment is real. It's fierce. It's irresistible. And it's deeply personal. God, with all that he is, opposes all that is evil, and he will deal with it all.

[21 : 50] Well, the second thing that Nahum shows us is inevitable judgment provoked. Inevitable judgment provoked. In chapter 3, verses 1 to 7. Sin is truly an affront to God himself, and must result in his judgment.

In verses 1 to 4, we have the sins of Nineveh laid bare. Woe to the bloody city. The city whose thirst for blood never ran dry. The city who brought only agony.

But notice what goes with violence and death. Lies. Stealing. Nineveh wasn't just the epicenter of violent intent.

It was the epicenter of untruth. Full of lies that everything had a bent towards one's own flourishing. And where there's no respect for life or for truth, then there's also no respect for possessions.

And so it was also the city of plunder. There's an example in Judah's history of the kind of lies that were commonplace in Nineveh. Back in 2 Kings chapter 18 and 19, we can read about the reign of King Hezekiah.

[23 : 05] And an emissary of Assyria called Rabshakeh comes to Judah and demands to speak to the people, refuses to speak to Hezekiah's representative. He wants to speak to all of the people.

And with lips dripping honey, He calls on the people of Judah to ignore their king, to submit to Assyria, and that they'll each get their own vineyard and fig trees.

Come with me, He says, and I'll take you to a land of abundance. He promises prosperity to the Lord's people. If only they'll go His way. This is the way of life.

This is the way of flourishing. Come with me. But of course, all of it's a lie. So often things that promise that are. Mayhem is showing where Nineveh's loyalties lay by talking of their bloody violence and their disregard for truth.

He makes clear they belong to the devil. That we saw last week in John chapter 8 with Edward, Jesus saying, you are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

[24 : 13] He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there's no truth in him. He's a liar and a father of lies.

When truth goes out the window, then don't be surprised that violence follows. Nineveh were living for their father, the devil. I think verse 2 and 3 could be taken as both the way that Nineveh meets its end, but also the way Nineveh conducted itself.

In pursuit of their version of the Tower of Babel, there was crack of the whip, rumble of the wheel, galloping horses, binding chariots, and all leading to verse 3. There's just four different ways of talking about dead bodies.

Hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end, so much so that they stumble over the top of them. So many corpses, they're falling over them, piled high, and Nahum's making clear that what you've sown, you will reap.

But why did Nineveh slay so many? Well, verse 4, all of this was for the countless whorings of the prostitute, to gratify their own lust for manipulation and power.

[25 : 32] Nahum calls the city a whore, filled with all the charms and graces and allure, fitting of such a title, but below all that charm, death and betrayal.

Nahum is making plea in the reality. The great city of the day, with all of its trappings and enticements, is exposed as being full of utter degradation. Nahum wipes away any pretenses and shows reality.

Nahum is making plea in these verses that sin is manifold and of the most grievous kinds. Murderous lies, theft, immorality of the vilest kinds, and even witchcraft and charms.

Overt partnership with evil. And so once again, verse 5, Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts.

And the personal nature of judgment is made even more plain here. Sin is a terrible affront to God himself. It isn't just that he arbitrarily prefers some behaviors to others, that he churns out the latest thing that comes to mind as a law.

[26 : 44] Sin and judgment aren't a cause and effect thing. It's a rebellion, a declaration of rebellion against a mighty and loving king. It's an attack on him.

Sin is pointedly denying God his place. It's usurping him. It's twisting what is good and right in his glorious design, and preferring other things that can only lead to destruction.

And so sin isn't insignificant and minor. Listen to Nahum. Behold, I am against you. I will lift up your skirts of your face.

I will make nations and kingdoms look at your nakedness and shame. I will throw filth at you. I will treat you with contempt. I will make you a spectacle. Sin is truly an affront to God himself and must be dealt with.

And so when God does move in judgment, we've seen that there'll be no escaping it, no defense against it, no hiding from it, and nothing good remaining after it. But more than that, he will make plain all the evil that has been done.

[27 : 57] Nineveh will be fully exposed, all of its sin laid bare. So we mustn't be naive in thinking that our sins can be concealed and hidden, that we can arrive at church week after week with smiling faces, playing at piety, all the while given to our desires and to this world in secret.

Perhaps the most devastating part of God's judgment here is the exposure. Verse 5, he will pull Nineveh's skirt up over their face, confronting them with what they really are.

I think the prostitute idea carries through here. God will show people the full extent of what they are. Look at the paraphernalia for use for your whoring.

I've pulled up your short skirt that you use to lure people in. I've pulled it right up over your face to show you your sin. But also, I'm exposing your genitals, your private parts, so that all the world know your shame and what evil you've done.

I throw filth at you. There's no pretend piety. I'll make plain the filth that is yours. I'll cover you in it. God's judgment tears down the facade and reveals the reality.

[29 : 20] I'll treat you with contempt, as a fool who presumed to mock me. And I'll transform you from being supreme in this world to being a spectacle.

often we to tremble at the prospect of God putting on full display exactly what we are, what we've done, what we've thought, what we've desired, what our hearts conjure up.

Is there anything more terrifying or fearful than receiving from God exactly what is deserved and everyone else seeing us for what we are?

Well, finally, in the midst of it all, verse 7, all who see the spectacle will say, Wasted is Nineveh. They witness dismaying judgment a terrible sight, but no one will be grieving.

Indeed, even God himself says, Where shall I seek comforters for you? Because even I cannot find any. Listen to O. Palmer Robertson describe the comfort that there would be from Nahum's message of judgment here.

- [30 : 45] He says, When the word of God comes with such preciseness of detail in describing the destruction of the enemies of God's people, then the Holy Spirit can use that description to rekindle the faith of the most discouraged of his people.

When Satan and his emissaries succeed over and over again in promoting deceit, untruth, and lies, when they're successful in discrediting the righteous, when they repeatedly wield the sword of power and popular support to devastate the godly, then even the strongest in faith begin to weaken, to doubt that God will ever vindicate the cause of truth and righteousness.

But doubting saints need only turn their enlivened imaginations to the descriptions of Nahum and apply them to their own struggles with Satan's forces. With crack of whip and rumble of wheel, with galloping horse and bounding chariot, the God-appointed avenger shall soon and suddenly appear.

The contemporary enemy of truth and righteousness shall not stand any more than did ancient Nineveh. Great comfort for the Lord's people.

Nahum lays bare then for us irresistible judgment and inevitable judgment. A comfort, but also a challenge. And we must heed the warning here.

- [32 : 10] For when God says he will by no means clear the guilty, we must with humble hearts realize that that is us too. The dreadful judgment of God that is coming is not going to fall on bad people and spare the good people.

No, the dividing line is those who are rebellious against God and those who've been rescued from rebellion against God. The rebellious and the rescued rebellious.

It was only a couple of weeks ago we were in Ephesians chapter 2 which tells us that we were children of wrath. We were. Jesus himself said on that last day he'll say to many, depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

And he says, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who does the will of my father. And to the others he says, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. And we all know, at least, if we're being honest with ourselves, that our hearts spill over with sin and unfaithfulness to God.

- [33 : 25] One writer says, always the viper's nest in the sinner's heart is named Legion. And so when we read Paul's words that the wages of sin is death, we're all too conscious that Nahum's vivid description of judgment is not about a single event in history that's past, but it echoes and foreshadows an even more terrible day.

But the reason God's judgment can be a comfort is because chapter 1, verse 7, the Lord is good and he is a stronghold in the day of trouble.

On that day, the only place one can possibly go for refuge is to God himself. And so those who don't just pay lip service to him, those who really do respond to his grace with loyalty and love, those who don't simply say, Lord, Lord, but those who do the will of the Father, then on that great last day, the words won't be, behold, I'm against you, but instead, 1, verse 7, I know you.

I know those who take refuge in me. I used the illustration of a forest fire last week and in a forest fire as it rips through the forest covering over 14 miles per hour, there's only one place that is safe if you're caught in its path, the place that's already been burned.

Terrible judgment is coming, but those who look to the Lord, those who see in him a stronghold, those who see in him a refuge, those who delight in covenant relationship with him, then they rest in the place where such judgment has already fallen.

[35 : 28] For this irresistible, awful, exposing judgment in all of its terror has already fallen upon the Lord Jesus. And so choose this day.

Will judgment be terrible news? Because on that day the Lord himself will say to you, Behold, I'm against you. Or will it be real comfort when evil is dealt with and when the Lord says to you, I knew you.

I knew those who take refuge in me. Let's pray. Gracious Lord God, grant us the grace that we require to be found faithful to you.

Prick any pride or entitlement within our hearts and draw us ever nearer to the rock, the refuge, the rescue that is found in Jesus alone.

And it's in his name we pray. Amen. Amen.