

SESSION #40

NAHUM

1. Setting

Here is a prophet to Judah whose ministry comes just after Isaiah, as you see on the timeline chart. But more importantly, we need to connect Nahum here with Jonah. Note that Nahum comes well after Jonah, about 100 years later. By the time we read the story of Nahum, Assyria has already invaded Israel twice.

So, Nahum comes with a message directed against Nineveh, the Assyrian capital city. It is in sharp contrast to the message we saw in Jonah's story in our previous session.

The book of Nahum contains some of the most magnificent Jewish poetry ever written. Unfortunately, we miss a great deal of its appeal in translation.

2. Message

The basic theme underlying all of that poetry in the book of Nahum is this: "*Woe to Nineveh!*" (3:1) God is now against Nineveh. When you look at what has happened in the 100 years before Nahum comes on the scene, no wonder 1:3 is considered the key verse in this book. It begins this way: "*The Lord is slow to anger and great in power...*" – that was Jonah's message. But then the last half of the verse says, "*[the Lord] will not leave the guilty unpunished.*" That becomes Nahum's message to the very same people.

Yes, Nineveh appeared to respond positively and genuinely in repentance under Jonah's ministry and God then takes His hand of judgment off the Assyrians. But some time shortly thereafter, they turned back again and repented of their repentance, if you will. So, by the time we come to Nahum, here is a people indeed who knew the right way but have now turned their backs on it and are persisting in sin.

Consequently, God has to come now with a severe message of judgment. God will always forgive sin repented of, but He will not forgive sin persisted in. He doesn't condone that behavior and He will bring some message of judgment against it.

The first few verses of Nahum contain almost every Hebrew word relating to wrath, anger and judgment because that is the core of God's message through him to the people of Nineveh. More than in any other OT book this prophet is an angry prophet with the anger that comes from God's anger against sin, against a people who knew the right way but have now plunged back into their old sinful ways again.

Through Jonah we saw something of the reality of God's goodness to people; but through Nahum, we see the reality of God's severity. He never changes but His approach to us will be different depending on how we respond to Him.

Nahum's name means "comfort" which may seem like a strange meaning for the angriest prophet in the Bible. But by giving his message of terrific judgment by God against a wicked nation, this is precisely a comfort to *God's people* who by this time are wondering, *"Is God ever going to take any action against sin? Does God care? Is God ever going to do something about all that's wrong with those wicked Assyrians?"* And Nahum comes to say, *"Yes, God will do something about it."* And in that sense, he surely is a comfort indeed to the people of Judah.

We live in a world that is full of sin and injustice and seeming to get worse with every passing year. And we, like God's people in Nahum's day, may share their concern: *"Is God ever going to do something about all the evil around us?"* This book encourages us to remember that God is still in control, He is still sovereign. And yes, we can be confident that God – the righteous Judge – will some day right all the wrongs. In the meantime, God – who is "slow to anger" – is giving people time to turn to Him.

3. Structure

In chapter 1 Nahum declares Nineveh's doom with Jehovah in focus as the Judge bringing a verdict against a guilty people, much like Micah had done.

In chapter 2, Nineveh's doom is described and Jehovah is now acting with righteous anger against a people who have shown themselves to be persistent sinners. Nahum 2:3-6 contains a very detailed prophetic description of what will happen:

“Shields flash red in the sunlight! The attack begins! See their scarlet uniforms! Watch as their glittering chariots move into position, with a forest of spears waving above them. The chariots race recklessly along the streets and through the squares, swift as lightning, flickering like torches. The king shouts to his officers; they stumble in their haste, rushing to the walls to set up their defenses. But too late! The river gates are open! The enemy has entered! The palace is about to collapse!” Notice the vivid details of Nahum’s description of an event that will happen only 50 years later in 612 B.C., the doom Nineveh will experience because of God’s anger against them.

In chapter 3, Nahum tells us why God is doing this: their doom is absolutely deserved. God is acting in righteous anger against a people who forsook repentance and went back to their cruel, sinful practices.

4. Prophecy Fulfilled

As we noted already, perhaps the most astonishing thing about his prophecy is that it was so specific and so detailed 50 years in advance of the actual event. There are 12 specifics in this prophecy and they were all fulfilled exactly as he had prophesied.

Apparently an unusually heavy flood of the Tigris River which flowed through the city of Nineveh carried away a large portion of the wall which was protecting the city. And at the time this flood water hit the city wall, the Babylonian army had been encamped around the city, besieging it. But so far, they couldn’t get in due to the thickness of the city walls. However, when that wall eroded because of the flood the Babylonians quickly took advantage and got into the city through this gap and overcame it in a matter of hours. Precisely as Nahum had predicted. And the Babylonians so thoroughly destroyed Nineveh that its ruins were not identified until 1845!

In our next session we will look at Zephaniah, another prophet to Judah who lived in the time of Nahum.
