

The lion and the prostitute

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[0:00] So, if you'd like to have your Bible open at Nahum chapter 2, just check I get the right, I can start my own chart, make sure I get the right dates, just to remind you, I'm not going to go through all the timeline again, but just to remind you that Nahum was writing, well, after the destruction of Thebes in 663 BC, probably shortly after that, and that the city of Nineveh would indeed be destroyed in 612 BC. So, Nahum is writing roughly 50 years before the time, the events in which he's describing. And the rest of this prophecy is really all one single section, but we need to divide it up somewhere, so I thought what we'd do today is focus on these three vivid word pictures that Nahum paints, and they are very vivid, aren't they?

Now here we are clearly thinking specifically of Nineveh, although again the name doesn't appear that often, it does appear in the text in 2 verse 8, it says Nineveh is like a pool, and again in, I've lost the other one, but there is another place, yeah, 3 verse 7, that's right, there Nineveh is in ruins, it does appear in the text there.

But elsewhere it doesn't, and I think that does, we need to keep that in mind as we try and interpret this passage. So, well, I showed that picture last week of some Assyrian musicians, here's something a bit more warlike, or there will be in a minute, I've just put the three, listed the three pictures that we get there.

First of all the battle, and then the lion, and then the harlot, or the prostitute. And Nineveh is predicting the destruction, sorry, Nahum is predicting the destruction of Nineveh 50 years or so before it happened.

That's from the Assyrian frieze, that picture is from the Assyrian frieze in the British Museum, and you can see it's bowmen, doesn't show up wonderfully well, but I think you can see that they are archers there.

[2:17] Now, so let's look first of all at verses 3 to 10, this dramatic description of the battle. There is some dispute actually about what this actually describes, the kind of older, more traditional interpretation, is that this is describing the fighting within Nineveh itself.

But with a close examination of the text, actually, this doesn't seem to quite make sense. For example, if the enemy is already fighting in the city squares, as you would have to think of verse 4 was about, the chariots storm through the streets and so on, why would they be dashing to the wall?

It's not entirely clear. Also, I should say, of course, it talks about the protective shield being put up. Well, of course, you don't put up a protective shield normally when you're defending a city, it's the invading army that puts up the protective shield over their siege machinery.

So, Rupert Bentley Taylor actually suggests that the whole of verses 1 to 6 actually refers to the attackers, and that it actually makes more sense that way.

But I don't think we can be entirely sure either way, but certainly Nahum is painting us a picture of the gathering storm. And it all moves so fast, doesn't it?

[3:46] It's blitzkrieg, as the phrase is sometimes done, lightning war. He talks about flashing like lightning, doesn't he? And this is a lightning attack. The attack comes so fast that the defenders are actually unprepared for it in verse 1.

And I suggest we start in verse 3 with the enemy army mustering for the attack. I say it could be the Ninevites mustering for defence, but it seems to make more sense if it's actually the enemy army mustering for the attack.

Perhaps we see them on parade in their city. Perhaps it's in Babylon or one of the allied cities. Actually, it's beautiful, isn't it? The horror of war is given here a certain grandeur, a certain beauty. The chariots, the red uniforms, the shields of the soldiers are red. The metal on the chariots flashes. They look like flaming torches.

They dart about like lightning. There is a certain beauty to the machinery of war, and yet it's horror. It's a beauty of a certain horror.

[4:58] Anyway, the attack comes so fast. What's about to happen? Things suddenly get moving. The chariots are storming through the streets. Perhaps this is a training exercise.

Chariot warfare in an urban environment. Or maybe they're just showing off their skills. Or maybe they're just picking up speed and they won't slow down again until the battle is over.

The attack's so fast that even the SAS, in verse 5, have difficulty in keeping up the pace. Whether you think that's the attackers or the Ninevites, why would they stumble?

Well, Rupert Bentley Taylor, I think it's what he's saying, is that everything is happening so fast that even the crack troops can't keep up with it. It's just over, almost before it's begun.

And they dash, we're told, to the city walls, and the protective shield is put in place. And the river gates are thrown open, it says in verse 6, and the palace collapses.

[6:04] In actual fact, in 612 BC, there's some evidence, I gather, that Nineveh was struck twice. The attack was sort of masterminded from Babylon, but with the assistance of certain allies, notably the Medes and the Persians.

And there is some suggestion that, in fact, the allies got there first. And were able to breach the river gates, because the river runs through the city, and of course that makes a weak point in the defences of the city.

And some people have suggested they managed to flood the city somehow, there's some dispute over this. But somehow it's suggested that in the initial attack, the river gates were breached, and the palace was sacked.

But during the initial attack, the attackers weren't there in sufficient numbers to take over the city. That had to wait for a few months later, when the main Babylonian army turned up.

I think, you know, there's confusion, there's not complete understanding of what happened. But there is some suggestion, apparently, historically, this is actually what happened. So, if that's the case, then Nahum's prophecy is remarkably accurate.

[7:20] It says that the river gates are breached, and the palace is thrown down. But then there is a bit of a delay, and it's decreed that the city be exiled and carried away.

So, given that he was writing this 50 years in advance, it's just really quite a remarkable insight. But then after that, we have the aftermath of the battle.

Suddenly it all slows down, doesn't it? And Nineveh is pictured as if it's one of its reservoirs.

The wall of the reservoir is breached, and there's no way to stop the flow. Nothing you can do, really, once the wall is breached. The water will just flow out.

There's no way to stop it. But what flows out of this city is not water, but in Sadi, first of all, it's people, in verse 8. And then the treasure, in verse 9.

[8:24] And it seems that silver and gold flow like water from a seemingly endless supply. And what remains of the population is in despair.

So, we have this sudden attack, this sudden disaster, in a very short space of time, really destroyed the city of Nineveh. And it was as if all that had been built up there over hundreds and even thousands of years, suddenly all flowed out in a few days.

Just all ran away, as it were, like water running out of a reservoir. Quite a remarkable description.

But how can this have happened? What's the cause of this disaster?

Nahum wants his readers to understand this. He wants to understand the rotteness that was behind the great Assyrian Empire, what caused it to disintegrate. Because it did, a few years before the fall of Nineveh, the empire was pulled apart by civil war.

What caused this to happen? Well, should we be interested in that? I mean, for us, the fall of Nineveh is ancient history. It's two and a half thousand years ago. Why should we care about that now?

[9:42] But the causes of that fall, I would suggest, are still with us today. And so it is well worth looking at these pictures that Nahum gives us.

And he makes his point by these two illustrations, the lion and the prostitute. Another picture from the frieze there.

That one I think shows up much a bit better. You can see it's a lion hunt. People on horses, spearing lions. Lions were a potent symbol of power and pride for ancient Middle Eastern cultures, and particularly for the Assyrians.

One of the largest parts of the Assyrian frieze is of this lion hunt. Turns out, though, actually, historians have discovered, archaeologists have discovered it was slightly faked.

Because what actually happened was that the lions were kept penned up in a sort of safari park type thing. And then when they wanted to hunt, the lion was driven out and the king could then have the excitement of killing his own lion, as it were.

[11:04] So there was a sort of lion park in Nineveh. And Nahum makes this a picture, doesn't he, of the city itself.

The rapaciousness of the lion. Arrogant, greedy, killing and grabbing more than was really needed for food.

In verse 13, you notice the empire's warriors are described as the lion's cubs. Nineveh saw itself, perhaps, as a lion, powerful, invincible, and indeed arrogant and rapacious, grabbing up other societies, other countries as prey.

But what does the Lord say about it? He says, I'm against you. The Lord opposes such rapaciousness and he's determined to judge it. And like the den of the lion, the city, in chapter 3, verse 1, is filled with blood.

Just in case you've missed the point, he says it explicitly. Just as the lions kill, there'll be blood everywhere. So, in the city, the city is filled with blood.

[12:26] The armies are always seeking more conquest and piling up more bodies. Chapter 3, verse 3. And it seems that aggression and violence have become a way of life.

It's a way of life that God hates. And the lion cubs will die. And I don't know how well you can see that, but that's quite gory.

There's three lions with spears in them. The one on the top right has obviously had arrows through its rear portions and it can no longer walk.

It can't operate its back legs. And it is dying, but it's still struggling. And Nahum describes the fall of the city like that.

That it will be, the lion cubs will be destroyed. So, that's Nahum's description of the city, like a pride of lions.

[13:32] But how does such a society arise? What gives it birth? What sustains its vitality? So, Nahum invites us to meet the harlot, the prostitute.

There is an image of Ishtar, or possibly her sister, Eshkigal, in the British Museum. Nahum, it's probably from about a thousand years before Nahum.

It was an ancient cult, the cult of Ishtar. Probably from the time of Hammurabi, around 1700 BC. And Ishtar, let's assume it is Ishtar, is naked.

And she's standing on two lions. And this is the image. Images of Ishtar are few and far between because of the destruction of the temple in Nineveh.

This particular image is probably from some sort of house shrine. It's only quite a small thing, about half a meter high. But it does describe Nineveh as, well, as a naked woman.

[14:44] But she has wings and claws on her feet. And she holds symbols of divinity. But Ishtar is the seductress.

That's their goddess. The goddess of lust and seduction and magic. And she was also the goddess of war. And so it was her lust and desire that binds people into slavery.

This is what Nahum says. Again, he describes the city in terms of their goddess. And that's a very appropriate thing to do, isn't it?

Because when you think about it, we become what we worship. Don't we? That's what happens. What gives our life meaning, the things we think about, what are our deepest values.

In the end, we become those. And so Nahum suggests it's as if the city itself, the city of Nineveh, had become Ishtar, the goddess of lust and seduction and magic.

[15:51] And her lust and desire binds people into slavery. Initially, perhaps not by violence, but by seduction, by greed.

But this treating of people as objects, as sexual objects, I suppose soon spills over into violence. We see that, don't we, in individual sexual crime today.

But we also see it in societies. Our Western societies may not worship the goddess explicitly. And as I say, there are very few images of Ishtar remaining.

I said last week, Ishtar has no followers today. Yet, we do worship the attributes of Ishtar, don't we?

In our Western societies. Lust, greed, power. That was what Nineveh was about. That was what Ishtar was about. And to a large extent, increasingly so, that's what our societies today are about.

[16:56] So while we may not worship Ishtar explicitly, we are in many ways disciples in our Western societies. The treatment of human beings as fodder for consumption.

Perhaps not by force of arms nowadays, but by multinational companies that are only interested in exploitation.

Military imperialism is a bit out of fashion at the moment, because we still have the horror of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. It's only a generation or two back. And perhaps that horror has turned people aside from this sort of military violent repression.

But no matter, the sorcerer has more subtle weapons to apply. The seduction of sexual allure, the witchcraft of secret power and manipulation.

Ishtar suggests is the ultimate goddess made in our image. And in the end, a government that acknowledges no god must become a god itself.

[18:13] Because humans can't live in a spiritual vacuum. The state and the society it creates must demand the worship and the absolute obedience of its subjects.

Even today now, we're told that if we live in bright, like Britain, we must subscribe to British values, whatever that means, or risk exclusion. So we talk about multiculturalism and freedom.

And yet we get, even here, with all our history of freedom and toleration, we increasingly get a monolithic culture and a culture of political correctness.

And look at the subtlety of it. An obvious evil such as ISIL today is opposed, isn't it, by a much more insidious evil of restrictions on our freedoms.

I mean, nowadays we have ways of spying on individuals' human lives that the KGB or the Gestapo would have died for.

[19:19] I mean, there is so much more that can be done to restrict our freedoms, not by violence in this case, but by spying and by cultural pressure.

But actually, it's doubtful, I would suggest, even if this compromise can be sustained for long. In Nineveh, it wasn't.

Someone once said, it's a short step from burning books to burning people. What now seems unthinkable may become commonplace in a generation or two.

After all, many Britons are thinking it now, aren't they? We find all these Britons going off to fight on one side or other with the conflict.

Many of them going to fight for ISIL. Most of us can't imagine why anybody would want to do that. And yet, some Britons are doing precisely that.

[20:21] Others are going to fight on the other side, of course. History is against Western liberalism. We'll look next week at the reality check that we get when it talks about thieves.

But let's just think now. History is against Western liberalism. Just look at the French reign of terror. Look at communist Cambodia. Look at Eastern Europe before the fall of the wall.

And look at Nazi Germany. Germany. There's a German philosopher, I think, Hegel, who said that history teaches us nothing.

I believe that was Hegel. Even as I speak tonight, it seems our social democratic Labour Party is in the process of being hijacked by left-wing extremists.

I don't know whether that's true or not, but there does seem to be a suggestion that it is. And this is the seduction of the worship of lust and greed and power.

[21:29] And we only need to look to Nineveh to see where the seductress is taking us. Now you may feel I'm being overly dramatic. It's not as bad as that.

Well, no, it's not as bad as that yet, here. And yet, that is the direction in which our societies are taking themselves.

And they are becoming increasingly arrogant and increasingly sure that they can declare what is right and proper. And we're overtired anybody who disagrees.

And as I said, a nation that acknowledges no God, a government that acknowledges no God, must in the end become a God itself.

Just look what happened at France at the Revolution, that atheist government. It became the center of empire.

[22:26] It gave the opportunity after the first reign of terror and then when the chaos was ruled in by Napoleon, by brute force. But what happened in Stalinist Russia, all those liberal thoughts, I'm sure that Marx had no idea what his ideas would give birth to.

I'm sure he saw his ideas of giving birth to increasing freedom and peace in the world. He did think there might have to be revolution, but what we got was not revolution just, but tyranny.

So it's depressing, isn't it? But there is hope. We become what we worship, but there is hope. And that hope we see in verse 5 of chapter 3.

And what is that hope? It says, I am against you, declares the Lord Almighty. It's not Nahum who is against them particularly.

It's not even Judah. Or it's not Babylon or Egypt. It is the Lord himself who is against this adulterous city of Nineveh.

[23:47] And his imagery is quite graphic, isn't it? I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame.

I will pelt you with filth. I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, Nineveh is in ruins. Who will mourn for her?

Where can I find anyone to comfort you? That which is dressed up in fine clothes will in the end be revealed for what it is. The Lord will ensure that.

History shows that this is true, doesn't it? Robespierre, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot are indeed all objects of contempt now. However much they dressed up their crimes in fine rhetoric.

Hitler's thousand year Reich managed about ten years. But the question is, are we any better? 760 BC when Nahum wrote, Assyria appeared absolutely invincible.

[24:54] It was at the height of its military power. That one defeat at the gates of Judah was pretty much the only defeat. Assyria seemed, when Nahum was writing, there seemed absolutely no chance of this prophecy being fulfilled.

And Nahum, as I say, addresses that in the next section and we'll come back to the next week. But let's just say now, it only took 50 years to fall apart. A generation and a bit.

A couple of kings. And then no one was queuing up to lament it. We were thinking this morning, weren't we, that the true adversary is Satan himself.

It's not Nineveh. It's not the EU in Brussels. It's not ISIL even. The true enemy is Satan himself. And the adversary whispers lies into our ears like the emissaries of Nineveh did. Whispers seductions. Not always violent.

[26:12] Sometimes they say seductions. Phil likes to remind us when he talks about Rome in Revelation, doesn't he? That the attack is always two-pronged.

The state can threaten violence, but it can also offer riches. And Nineveh did both of those. And our society today does both of those.

Will we be seduced by them? And what are the lies that the adversary whispers? They're often different lies to different people. And they're nearly always half-truths.

They're the most deadly kind of lies. Not infrequently, even the people of God can be deceived for a while. We saw that, didn't we, with Jonah.

We saw that with, well, perhaps we didn't, but if you look at the life of Hezekiah, you will see that he was deceived on one or two occasions, even as a godly king that he was.

[27:18] Even Josiah, who the king describes as the most godly of all the kings of Judah, was killed when he made a tactical mistake.

Even the most godly can be deceived sometimes. But in the end, these lies will be shown up for what they are. The nakedness of Nineveh, of the harlot, would be clear to all.

Say the statue of Nineveh. I didn't dare show it, because I thought it would shock people. I have got a photograph of the image from the British Museum, if anybody wants to see it. But I didn't dare put it on the slide, because I thought it would shock people.

She is naked in that image. But Nahum describes her as dressed in fine clothes. But he says, yes, those fine clothes will be ripped off, and you will be shown to be naked, that what seemed to be powerful and great, actually was vile and contemptible.

And the Lord says, that in the end, these lies will be shown up for what they are. And if we lack wisdom, we need to inquire of the Lord.

[28:40] So let's, before we turn to our communion, let's sing another hymn. Now this hymn is a hymn about the last things.

It refers not really to the destruction of Nineveh, although it could do, not to the destruction of Jerusalem, not to the destruction of the Roman Empire, or the British Empire, or any other empire in the end, but the destruction of all things created.

These intermittent judgments, intermediary judgments, as it were, has happened to Nineveh. Just to point us forward, to the time when all lies will be exposed.

So let's, before we turn to communion, sing hymn number 962.