

# The bad news and the good news

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[0:00] It says Martin Luther and that's indeed what Nahum has to say as well.! So I'm afraid we need a bit of a history lesson here before we can really understand what Nahum is about.

So we're moving on about 120 to 150 years from the time of Jonah. Now you remember that the people of Nineveh had repented at the preaching of Jonah, but that repentance turned out to be short-lived and they were soon back to their old ways.

Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel rather than Judah. And in 722 BC, the Assyrians, of which Nineveh was the major city, it wasn't actually the capital until 700 BC, but Nineveh was the major city, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.

And in fact, the northern Hebrew tribes more or less disappear from history. All that are left are the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the Levites, who many of whom, of course, were gathered around the temple in Jerusalem, that was the priestly clan, and there were a few northern survivors and refugees.

And we actually read a bit about them in 2 Chronicles 30, when they were invited to Jerusalem by Hezekiah. But they seem to have gone back to live in their towns in 2 Chronicles 31, and then they seem to have become mixed over the generations with the Gentiles, and so came to be what were known as the Samaritans by New Testament times.

[2:10] Really, most of the northern tribes disappeared from history. And so from now on, we're really talking not about Israel, but about the kingdom of Judah, which is not actually just the tribe of Judah, it was also the tribe of Benjamin and the Levites.

So Hezekiah's Judah was more or less a vassal state of Assyria from that time.

But probably at the instigation of the Egyptians or the Babylonians, we're not entirely sure what, he rebelled, and there was an Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 BC.

And Judah's second city of Lachish was destroyed, and if you go to the British Museum, you don't have to go to the Middle East to see it, you can just go to London to the British Museum in the Assyrian Hall, and there is a frieze that's been brought here from the ruins of Nineveh, certainly from Assyria, which actually shows the siege and capture of the city of Lachish.

But there is no reference, no frieze describing the fall of Jerusalem.

[3:35] And in fact, as was predicted by the prophet Isaiah, they failed to take Jerusalem. And in fact, an Assyrian army is destroyed outside the gates of Jerusalem without a battle.

In 2 Kings 19.35, we read, That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp.

When the people got up the next morning, there were all the dead bodies. We don't exactly know what form this angel of death took, whether it was a disease or infighting or some more direct intervention.

We don't know. But that the army was destroyed about outside Jerusalem and that Sennacherib failed to take the city is a well-established historical fact.

As I said, the destruction of Lachish is mentioned in the Assyrian records, but not the capture of Jerusalem. The Assyrians used to keep quiet about their relatively few defeats. And there are other ancient records that also attest the destruction of an Assyrian army.

[4:42] And in fact, the mere fact that Jerusalem was still there 100 years later is evidence that the city did indeed not fall to the Assyrians.

And so that's what happened around the turn of the century. Nineveh was actually made the imperial capital by Sennacherib around 700 BC.

And he built a palace there. It was also, of course, the main center for the worship of the goddess Ishtar. And the empire became notorious for its ruthlessness and brutal torture of captured enemies.

And indeed, you can see on some of the freezes and the other documents from ancient Assyria that had been found, how they almost boasted in their ruthlessness and the way they would torture those who were captured.

And so the nation of Judah, in Hezekiah's time, found itself at the center of struggles between these three superpowers. There was Assyria.

[5:44] A bit to the south was Babylon. And then, they were to the east of Judah, of course. Way to the southwest was the ancient empire of Egypt.

And these three superpowers were sort of in competition. But during the 700s BC, 600s BC, sorry, the Assyrians, most of the time, were in the ascendancy.

They were the great power. And in fact, Sennacherib destroyed the city of Babylon in 689 BC.

But Sennacherib's son, Esahaddon, rebuilt Babylon. And he was more concerned about Egypt. He maintained a long campaign against Egypt, which culminated after his death in 60...

He died in 669 BC. But in 663 BC, the Egyptian city of Thebes was destroyed by the Assyrians.

[6:52] Nahum actually refers to this event. So that's why we can date Nahum fairly accurately, because it's obviously shortly after the destruction of Thebes. Esahaddon's son was Ashurbanipal, who became emperor in 669.

Esahaddon, however, had also rebuilt Babylon and declared himself king of Babylon as well as of Assyria.

But on his death, Ashurbanipal became the emperor. But it's thought, and what happened really is a bit hazy, but it's thought that another brother, Seamus Shumukin, who was Ashurbanipal's brother, another son of Esahaddon, was made a sort of puppet king in Babylon.

But that split of power, in the end, would prove to be disastrous for the Assyrian Empire. Because after Ashurbanipal, Assyria degenerated into a civil war with various people trying to establish themselves.

And as a result of this, as a resurgent Babylon under Nebo-Polasa, who had been an Assyrian official, but became king of Babylon, and he formed alliance with the Medes and the Persians and various other people, and he sacked Nineveh in 612 BC.

[8:18] And the Assyrian Empire survived for a few years after that, but basically that was the downfall of the Assyrian Empire, and it pretty well ceased to exist in about 6 BC.

And from then on, Babylon became the dominant power. Just not particularly relevant to Nahum, but I'll just mention the Egyptians at that point tried to, having been enemies of Assyria, tried to save the Assyrian Empire because they were too scared of the Babylonians.

They sent an army, and Josiah, king of Judah, tried to intercept it, which proved to be a fatal mistake because he was killed in the battle. But that's after the time of Nahum, so we didn't say too much about that.

But we do need to know what was going on in Judah at this time. So Hezekiah, basically, although he wavered a bit, was a godly king. But in 687 BC, he was succeeded by his son Manasseh.

And Manasseh was one of the worst kings that Judah ever had. He undid all the reforms that his father had set up. He led the nation into idolatry and into worship of Baals and the, I can't remember the god's name, but the various other idols.

[9:42] And this was the context of Nahum's prophecy. Nahum was writing during the time of Manasseh. Manasseh. As I've just said on the slide, I won't go into the details, there is some doubt over the exact dates of Manasseh because some records say he reigned 45 years and some say 55 years, but I won't go into that.

He was succeeded very briefly by Ammon and then by Josiah, who again was a very godly king. In fact, he's described in kings as the most godly of all the kings of Judah. But Nahum is writing during the time of Manasseh when Judah was once again plunged into all the evils of idolatry and was

basically, once again, a vassal state of Assyria.

And it was in this context that Nahum prophesied. So I'm sorry about, there's rather a lot of history there, but it does kind of matter because you need to understand this to understand what Nahum was saying.

Jonah is all movement and action with the exception of that central prayer. But Nahum is quite a different book. It paints a series of word pictures. And these pictures really have great vividness. And the purpose of these is to contrast the power and sovereignty and holiness of the Lord in contrast to the magic and deception and evil of Nineveh. Almost always in referring to God, Nahum uses the covenant name, Yahweh, which of course is written as the Lord in capital letters in our translations when he refers to God.

[11:28] It's not just any God that Nahum wants you to know about. It is this particular God, Yahweh, the Lord, that he wishes us to come to terms with. And in this first section, he introduces us to the character of the Lord and he describes in graphic terms the conflict between good and evil.

Now, Nineveh is certainly mentioned explicitly in verse 1, verse 1, and Judah is mentioned explicitly in chapter 1, verse 15. And they are obviously in the prophet's mind, but in fact, in this poem between chapter 2, verse 2 and verse 15a, they are not explicitly mentioned.

The NIV puts them in, presumably to try and make it easy to follow. But why they couldn't just put headings in like they do in the Song of Solomon, I don't know. They've put Nineveh and Judah in at what they think are appropriate places.

But in my view, this is a mistake. I don't think it's really helpful. Because it seems to me that in this prologue, Nahum seems to be thinking more generally about the conflict between good and evil. He certainly has Nineveh in mind, of course. But it's a meditation on the character of God as he relates to mankind. Nineveh provides the example of the rebellion against God.

[12:52] And interestingly, Nahum never says anything against Judah, even though he was writing in the time of Manasseh. So the Judah that Nahum is referring to is not the one that actually existed under King Manasseh.

It describes a people who willingly submit to God's rule. So it's an idealized, if you like, it's the true people of God that he's talking about, the true Judah, rather than the compromised state that actually existed at the time.

In verses 6 and 7, Nahum is clearly addressing all of mankind. And he describes the destruction of God's enemies and his rescue of the faithful. So we'll look at the chapter in a bit more detail.

It's not going to take us that long. It's quite a short chapter. But I think it's worth looking at it in detail. And three main sections I'd like to look at.

First of all, know who the Lord is. This is where Nahum starts. This is the Lord we're talking about here. And then he wants us to know, well, he says, he tells us a lot about who the Lord is.

[14:10] And then he mentions in verses 9 to 15, two agents. There's an agent of evil and there's a messenger of peace. And then I did read the first two verses of chapter 2, which does link into the next section.

but I thought it was, it's kind of a summary of chapter 1, so I thought it was worth reading that as well because that describes what I call the bad news and the good news. So let's look at these passages briefly.

So first of all, Nahum wants us to know who the Lord is. And first of all, he says, well, what kind of God is the Lord?

If you look around the idols and the temples, you can see all sorts of different gods. They had some pretty weird ones in Nineveh, I can tell you that. What kind of God is the Lord?

And Nahum puts the emphasis here on God's justice. He says, the Lord's anger is slow burning but it's relentless against evil. And the word that we translate vengeance, vengeance sometimes can have rather bad connotations.

[15:17] It can mean getting your own back in some spiteful way. But this, of course, is not what is meant here. It refers to repaying an evil that has been done against the Lord and thus establishing justice.

It's punishing those who do not, who are guilty. He says he will not leave the guilty unpunished. But it is important, of course, he does talk about vengeance and vengeance is, of course, paying back

for something done to you and that's important in itself.

Evil done in this world is not just done against men. The Lord declares it, in fact, as enmity to himself. So what kind of God are we talking about?

We're talking about a God of justice who does protect his people, the innocent, but will not leave the guilty unpunished. And then Nahum goes on to say, well, that's all very well, but does the Lord have sufficient power to make this stick?

After all, we might well cry out against injustice, but really, we have little or no power to put things right, do we? Nahum wants to remind us that the Lord does have power to carry out his will and he does it by this creation poem.

[16:43] Of course, as we were thinking this morning briefly, this, our atheist society wants to tell us that nature is somehow independent of God.

Now, of course, we do know that nature works by scientific laws and we're not pretending otherwise, of course, and yet Nahum reminds us that in fact it is the Lord who put these laws in place.

It is the Lord who maintains the universe by his word of power and that these destructive power of the storm or the flood or the earthquake or the volcano are in fact in a sense there to point out the power that the Lord has not just in the physical realm but also in the spiritual realm.

The Lord, Nahum, tells us is sovereign over land and sea. He says he dries up the sea. He's sovereign over the valley and he's sovereign over the mountaintop.

And we worry about climate change, don't we? Well, Nahum reminds us that when God's judgment comes there will be climate change. That Bashan and Carmel which were famous as being fertile plains Bashan, I think, was well known for its cattle and Lebanon which was and indeed still is full of these great trees, the cedars of Lebanon.

[18:21] Indeed, you don't have to go to Lebanon to see one. There's one at Niman's Gardens just up the road and they are very spectacular trees. But Nahum says that when the Lord's judgment comes he will turn Bashan and Carmel into a desert and that the trees of Lebanon which seem so strong and secure will actually wither and die.

And he tells us in verse 5 it's really futile to try and resist an earthquake or a volcano. You just can't do it. And so having described the literal as it were power of nature he now goes on to apply that metaphorically and ask the question is the Lord for you or against you?

And Nahum just drives home his point. You can no more escape God's anger than you can escape a volcano or flood.

And again he may have Nineveh in mind here because Nineveh was on the Tigris flood plain and was subject to floods from time to time. You can't escape a volcano or a flood but there is refuge to be found but that refuge is to be found in the Lord and that's the only place that refuge is to be found.

So if you take refuge in the Lord then indeed the Lord is for you but otherwise he's against you. It's as simple as that really and you can only really expect that God's judgment will be against you.

[19:57] You may feel you don't deserve it but it will be clear in the end that if you have rejected God then you have really rejected all good and that his judgment will rest on you.

So he moves from a description of destructive power of nature to imply that in the spiritual realm and says if the Lord is for you then he's a refuge a safe stronghold a place where you indeed you can hide but if the Lord is against you then you'll be swept away like a flood or a volcano.

And then in verses 9 to 15 we meet a couple of opponents and indeed this is why I think it's worth remembering that we need to think really he's not just talking about Nineveh here he's talking more generally there's an agent provocateur at work you notice we meet him in verse 11 and what's his job well his job is to plot evil and advise wickedness that's what he's there for to plot for people against the living God and we read right from verse 9 that he's having some success that there are indeed plotters who are trying to devise schemes against God now it's possible that Mayhem has a particular person in mind might have been some Assyrian emissary or spy but of course ultimately the plotter of evil represents

Satan himself the great liar the father of all lies and just as in John's first epistle there is the antichrist and there are antichrists who are in a sense representatives of the antichrist surely here

the plotter of evil is the representative of the antichrist whether Nahum has a particular person in mind or not the lies he's spreading the evil he's plotting are the lies of Satan himself and those who listen to him seem to be in the majority don't they in verse 12 they seem to be on the winning side must certainly have seemed like that at the time of Nahum not only was Assyria that great power in the ascendancy and really going around enslaving everybody else but even in his own land of Judah evil was being openly propagated and plotted and yet

Nahum reminds us that even though they seem to be on the winning side even though they seem to be in majority in fact they'll disappear without trace and in fact he tells us this three times if you look in verses 9 and 10 in verse 12 and in verse 14 and as you may be aware again in Hebrew literature if something is really important they will say it three times and Nahum here says it three times was he right well indeed as we've already seen Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC Jonah had reminded us it was the greatest city of its time but who remembers Nineveh nowadays it's remembered mostly for its cruelty and its destructiveness we go and look at these friezes and the other records in the British Museum and we say they did have musicians and architecture and yet what we see is their cruelty their destructiveness their desire to enslave and humiliate everybody else

[23:55] Nineveh has no friends now Nineveh was a great center of pagan worship particularly as I said of the goddess Ishtar but Nisroch and Ishtar and the other gods of Nineveh have no worshippers left they have no followers now and Nahum wants us to learn from this that only the Lord is a true friend and a true God and even when he rebukes his people as he reminds us he does in verse 12 yet in the end that's only to bring them to restore to bring them to restoration and to save a true people of God the work of the but in contrast to the agent of evil he tells us there's also a messenger of peace and the agent of evil you notice plots in secret he plots behind closed doors he whispers in people's ears and deceives them but the messenger of peace by contrast is running on the mountaintops he declares his message from the mountaintops for everyone to hear and he just says how beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim on the mountains who proclaim the good news now that phrase might sound familiar to you and if it does it's because well of course it occurs in the oratoria the Messiah but

Nahum was of course quoting there from the prophet Isaiah who also says how beautiful on the mountains are those who bring good news who proclaim good news so Isaiah 52 verse 7 so Isaiah had lived largely during the time of Hezekiah when things had seemed a bit more hopeful but Nahum says well that's still true Isaiah said that and that's still true that there is a messenger of peace who proclaims good news to Zion who reminds them that the Lord is sovereign and the Lord will restore his people and so hope is to be found not in those who plot against God but rather the messenger of peace but his message isn't for the idolatrous subjects of Manasseh who are really not much better than their Assyrian overlords but his message is for the true Judah the one who fulfills her vows and rejoices in the Lord and the Lord will ensure he has got a people to worship him whatever opposition man presents and so again just as the agent of evil ultimately of course is Satan who ultimately is the messenger of peace it may refer to his prophets and priests to some extent but ultimately the messenger of peace is the Christ the Lord Jesus Christ he is the one who proclaims joy and says that a people will be restored and if Judah remained rebellious as largely it did yet the Lord will still create a people he will create children of Abraham from dead bones as Ezekiel reminds us so just to finish there is some bad news there's a lot of bad news in

Nahum actually but here there's some bad news but there's also some good news those who rebel against God may marshal their strength as Nineveh is told to do in verse 1 but it will prove futile Nahum is going now going to turn attention to Nineveh itself and there'll be a graphic description of its destruction but we'll look at that next week but for now we just remember that God has the power to destroy his enemies he is the living God the Lord the one who says I am I will be what I will be and he will bring down those who oppose him as a negro spiritual says that you can run on for a long time but in the end the Lord is going to cut you down and that's what Nineveh found and that's what all God's enemies will find in the end on the other hand just look at the mess that God's people are in they were certainly in a mess in

