

The strong and the weak

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[0 : 00] So, have your Bibles open at Nahum chapter 3.!

We all think it will never happen to me, don't we?

We looked at the story of Jonah, and as I've said, some people have said perhaps Jonah is not history, perhaps it's a parable. Well, I think it is history, but if we think about it, there are some things in Jonah that we find a bit hard to believe.

And if you really think, what is it that we really find hard to believe in the story of Jonah? I mean, the fish thing is a bit improbable, but people have, you know, people have cheated death in all sorts of bizarre ways.

It's improbable, but it's not inconceivable. I think the thing that we really find hard to believe about the story of Jonah, is that when Jonah waltzes into the city and says, yet 40 days and...

[1 : 34] Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overturned. The fact that the Ninevites believed him.

Isn't that the thing that's really hard to get your head around in the book of Jonah? Because we all think it will never happen to me, don't we? It's particularly that's true when it comes to bad things. So we've just had this terrible accident that reminds us that in the midst of life, I think the Church of England prayer book says, in the midst of life we have death. That things are going on just as normal as in the time of Noah.

And suddenly, death impinges itself on us. We know these things to some extent. I mean, think of the Californians knowing their heads, because the geologists have told them that they live on the San Andreas Fault.

They know the catastrophic earthquake is a real possibility. But how much impact does it have on the everyday lives of most Californians? I suspect not a lot.

[2 : 50] We all think, really, it won't happen to us. We all worry a little bit about climate change, don't we? Probably not nearly as much as we should.

We think, well, that's a problem, really, not for us, but for our children and our grandchildren. And perhaps if we ignore it, it will go away. Remember when Hezekiah was told that he shouldn't have showed his treasures to the Babylonians, because eventually the Babylonians would capture Jerusalem.

Hezekiah was pleased, because he said, oh, it won't happen in my time. And when these warnings come from prophets and commentators rather than the scientists, we find it even harder to accept, don't we?

In fact, our unreasonable optimism is, I think, is something that's innate in all of us. When something good does happen, we make far too much of it.

I mean, look what happened when the Soviet Union collapsed and certain nations and peoples found themselves free, having been part of a repressive empire. What were we told?

[4 : 11] This was a new world order. Everything was going to be great from now on. Well, that new world order didn't last very long, did it? A few years ago, we were all thinking, oh, this Arab Spring, it's going to hush on a new age of democracy and freedom in the Middle East.

What have we got? The Syrian civil war. Troubles in Egypt. ISIL. It's interesting because having got involved in the Iraq war, the UK government then didn't get involved in the Syrian civil war because of a fear that we should just make things worse.

I'm not going to argue the pros and cons of that decision, but I will just quote one commentator on the Syrian civil war who said, well, actually, how much worse could things really get?

Fair point, isn't it? There is a saying, no problem is so bad that government intervention can't make it worse, but I'm not sure that's actually true, always.

We all have this delusion that it will all turn out right in the end. And it's a very hard thing for us to dispel from our minds.

[5 : 45] In the previous section, remember, Nahum's condemned in his arrogance. And he's pointed out that she's become like her rapacious goddess, Ishtar. And now we come to the last word.

But hang on a minute. Nahum's writing, probably during the reign of Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian empire was absolutely at the height of its power. Now, come on, Nahum.

Get real. This isn't going to happen, is it? You're imagining it. It's just never going to happen. It's not going to happen to us.

So Nahum thinks, well, how can he convince them? How can he try and persuade them otherwise? It's time, he says, for a reality check. And so we're going to look at this passage, as we go through this passage, and look at it in those three sections.

First of all, the reality check. Secondly, the fact there's no strength in numbers. And then finally, we'll look at this epitaph, these last couple of verses, which are God's last word, as it were, on Nineveh.

[6 : 56] And so he starts then by suggesting we take a look at history, and what for him and for the Assyrians was very recent history.

In Hebrew, it's no Ammon, but it's generally agreed that the city that they're talking about is Thebes in Egypt.

And he says, well, think about Thebes, which had been destroyed by the Assyrians themselves quite recently. First of all, it had much better defenses than Nineveh has.

Nineveh has a strategic weakness. It's got a river. The river runs through the middle of it. But in Thebes, the river was its strength.

The river runs round most of it. It was, I'm not sure of the exact geography, but presumably it was built on a promontory in a river. And so there was water on all sides. The river was a defense for Nineveh.

[8 : 01] And Nahum reminds us that Nineveh had powerful, sorry, that Thebes had powerful allies, more than Nineveh does. And Cush and Egypt, the two Egyptian kingdoms, of course, were powerful nations.

And Thebes itself was a powerful city. And the Thebians had doubtless thought that destruction would never happen to them either. But the Assyrians themselves had sacked the city.

And as we read in verses 10 and 11, they'd done it with their usual barbarism, killing children and carrying people off into slavery. Thebes' time had come.

And soon Nineveh's time had come also. When the figs are ripe, they will fall. Verse 12.

Nineveh, in her turn, would become arrogant and complacent, and her armies would become weak, and her defense is broken. Verses 13 and 14.

[9 : 18] Well, you can mend a wall, but you can't mend what is beyond repair. And Nineveh would soon be beyond repair.

Assyria's cruelties were making her many enemies. And they were just waiting to descend on her, like a swarm of locusts. As it says in verse 15a.

And that is a warning to us, individually and as nations. We think it won't happen to me. We think we're safe and comfortable in the West, don't we? But history says it will. When trouble comes, who are you going to call on?

Ghostbusters? That's a fantasy. But so often, the things we put our trust in are no better. Science can't protect us from human evil.

On the contrary, it just puts more effective tools into the hands of the tyrant. I mentioned last week, just think what the Gestapo or the KGB could have done with the tools that we have for spying on people nowadays.

[10 : 30] Science just makes the evil more effective. I'm a scientist by trade myself. I'm not saying science necessarily does that, just to be clear about this.

But what I am saying is that science can't save us from moral evil. People pretend that it can, but it doesn't. And history shows that it doesn't.

Somebody once said, educate a thief and you just get a clever thief. Give technology to a tyrant and you get a far more effective tyrant.

Just think how much of our scientific progress actually has its origin in warfare. I've got two computers in front of me here. Computers were invented largely in the Second World War. Tools for code breaking, among other things. For computing trajectories of missiles and the like. And actually, democracy doesn't seem to be able to help us either.

[11 : 39] What we hoped, didn't we, was that democracy was going to spread to the troubled nations of the Middle East. But what we find instead is that those troubles are in danger of undermining our Western democracies.

We find ourselves under attack and that the oppressive regimes of the Middle East are in fact reaching out to us far from the other way around.

Our democracies, we forget, were founded on three principles. First of all, that the law is a divine, not a human invention.

There was a TV program about Oliver Cromwell who quoted him as saying, if there is no hell, how can I enforce the law? I don't know whether Cromwell actually said that or not or whether it was an invention of the script writer.

But you can see, in a sense, his point that law, judgment, is an invention of God, not a human invention. And if we lose sight of that, then the state itself becomes a law.

[12 : 52] And the majority can become a tyranny sometimes. And the second principle of our democracies is that all humans are made in God's image. And therefore, all humans are valuable.

Humans do not belong to the state, to the ruler. They're not slaves. They belong to God. And the third principle of our democracy was that all humans are fallen and therefore cannot be trusted with unlimited power.

And so there are checks and balances built in. That's why we have separate judges and police and lawmakers. Nobody has unlimited power.

And yet all three of those principles are now under attack, not actually regarded as discredited. And so there is a rotten core, in a sense, at the heart of our Western democracies.

And we do wonder how long they can survive. I'm not threatening imminent doom. I have grandchildren. I trust that they will still live in a free society, which still acknowledges the rule of law.

[14 : 07] But we do wonder. And I say, the witness of history really is against us. And so often, our trouble actually is self-inflicted, isn't it?

We become complacent. We become secure in our health and wealth. Jesus told a parable about a man like that, didn't he? A man who had lots of, had a good business year, was a farmer, had lots of crops.

He said, I'll build extra barns and take my ease for the rest of my life. But Jesus says, tonight your soul will be required of you. And what good will your barns do you then?

You haven't stored up treasure on earth, but not treasure in heaven. So, to Assyria, Nahum says, look at the lesson of history.

And to us today, he says, look at the lesson of history. It is not guaranteed that things will carry on as they always have. We think they will, but they don't.

[15 : 15] But perhaps even that wasn't enough to convince Nineveh. Perhaps it's not enough to convince us. Sorry, I've got my slides to be numbered wrong here.

Never mind. I think we can keep track of it. Of course, having got the idea of locusts in his mind, Nahum then actually compares the Assyrians themselves to locusts, doesn't he?

They're still saying, perhaps, it won't happen to us. Look at all our traders, our armed caravans. I think this is probably the meaning of verses 16 and 17.

They're merchants, but they're not just merchants, they're guards with them and officials as well. You know, like the British Empire used to send its trading ships out with gunboats in support. Sometimes. This is the same, I think. They bring us wealth from all over the empire. We have a globalized economy.

[16 : 20] We're too big to fail. There's strength in sheer numbers. Well, yes, up to a point, but Nahum points out that this strength is the strength of the sworn.

Locusts strip the land and then they have to move on because there's no food left. Who knows where they went? Nahum says to the Assyrians, your merchants are going to be like that.

Do you think all these subject nations are blessing Assyria for the economic benefit that the empire brings? They might like to think that, but it just wasn't run that way.

The Assyrian Empire was rapacious, as I said. They were like locusts. They just took what they could grab. And of course, it's worth saying at this point, it's not trading that the Lord condemns. I don't think there's anything wrong with globalization in itself. But globalization does make it easy to exploit, doesn't it?

[17 : 41] I mean, if you have a village economy, you can treat your neighbor, but you can't, it's difficult to get away, it's difficult to ignore it and the social pressures of the community will be against you.

But when you're treating somebody thousands of miles away, then there's nobody there to object. Globalization does make exploitation so much easier and so much more we need to remind ourselves that the proverb says that the Lord loves honest scales.

I think that cuts two ways. It does mean that he is in favor of honest trade and honest activity.

Creation, we were told to subdue the world, fill the world and subdue it.

but the Lord hates dishonest scales, he hates those who cheat and steal and whose only aim in trade is to rip off the customer, whether the customer is next door or a thousand miles away.

And so Naeim says, get real, Nineveh, and accounting will come.

[19 : 01] And he says, get real, Western multinationals, and accounting will come. You can't live forever on borrowed moral capital any more than you can live forever on borrowed financial capital.

Debts must in the end be repaid. And so Naeim says to Nineveh and says to us, get real, me and you and every single human being on this earth and let's remember that in our hearts we each have as much capacity for evil as Nineveh did.

That surely is what he wants us to learn. And yet, the interesting thing is that Naheim doesn't actually say that. Nineveh won't rest in peace.

The original Assyrian Empire at the time of Hammurabi had actually been quite well organized. We've heard, we know, we learned at school perhaps of the Hammurabic Code.

one of the first empires to have proper processes of law. I used to teach history of mathematics and one of the things we remember is that the ancient Sumerian societies invented accountancy as well and the other tools that you need in order to run an empire properly.

[20 : 34] And in fact, many great empires of history have had at least some good points in spreading civilization and technology and the rule of law. When we talked about Communist Russia last week, Angela, who's Russian, of course, came and said afterwards, well, actually, of course, living in Russia, if you kept on the good side of the authorities, it wasn't that bad.

Even Communist Russia increased, you know, improved the education in rural areas and developed technology and infrastructure. I mean, let's face it, even Nazi Germany modernized the devastated German economy and encouraged quality engineering and yet Nineveh, the Neo-Assyrian empire, is almost an object lesson in how to do almost everything wrong.

It was cruel, it was rapacious, it was inconsistent, destroyed rival Babylon in one generation and then, because of its greed, fatally rebuilt it a few years later.

It cared only for wealth and for power. As I said, it was Ishtar made flesh. Few regimes actually are as barbarous as Assyria was, although certainly some are.

And in fact, unusually, for a prophet of Yahweh, Nahum leaves out the usual warning. that's one of the unusual things about the prophecy of Nahum. Normally, there are words of warning for the people of God.

[22 : 12] But in fact, in Nahum, there are only words of encouragement for the people of God and those are quite few and far between. Yet Nahum was writing during, as I said, during the time of Manasseh, that terrible ruler, that ungodly ruler who wasn't that much better than the Assyrians.

Usually, the prophets gave that message, take care or you will end up the same. But Nahum doesn't actually say that. Why?

Well, I don't know, but perhaps because even Nahum thought that the case of Nineveh was so extreme that the warning wouldn't be taken seriously. that nothing was quite as bad as Assyria. And even the empires that followed Babylon and then the Medes and Persians certainly were better in many ways than the Assyrian Empire. Assyria itself stands as a warning instead to those who worship lust and wealth and power.

the leaders became corrupt and self-serving. Verse 18 and as a result the people are scattered. As I said, you can mend a wall but you can't mend what is irretrievably broken.

[23 : 43] Verse 19 you can't heal a wound which is fatal. And there is a note of regret perhaps in that a note of pity even in the words of Nahum in those two verses and yet that's not how he ends his prophecy.

Jonah remember ends with those words of grace should I not be concerned for that great city. but that's not how Nahum ends.

One would like almost to have given the sermons in the opposite order to do Nahum first and Jonah afterwards so that you could finish with that message of grace.

But that would be wrong chronologically and I guess actually if you think about it that would be wrong theologically as well because the message of grace is held out today but not forever.

The scripture reminds us there is a time of judgment there is a time when that which is wicked will be destroyed.

[25 : 04] So there will be no monument to Nineveh. The greatest city of the age would soon be wiped from the face of the earth.

We find its treasures looted as they looted others. We find its people enslaved as they enslaved others. As I said it disappeared literally from history for some over 2,000 years.

People didn't even know where it was until the end of the 18th century when the beginning of the 19th century when the location was finally located was finally found.

What remains from Nineveh? Not very much. But there are a few things. There are a few stone freezes in the British Museum.

Most of those give us an impression of the thing I started with. It does show that it had musicians. It wasn't all barbarous. But most of those stone freezes that we gawp at, our reaction is one of horror.

[26 : 17] How could a sophisticated society be so cruel? And we have descriptions of images of people being enslaved, of cities being destroyed, of lions being cruelly killed.

people. So Nineveh is still a warning to those who are complacent in their own strength and confidence. So there's no monument, sorry, for Nineveh.

But there is an epitaph. Nahum gives an epitaph here. What is it? Will there be those who regret the passing of a great city? No, on the contrary, there's delight.

Nahum has the last word. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

The destruction of Nineveh is a cause for celebration. What a terrible thing that is. And yet it stands as a warning to us.

[27 : 25] There was no longer any hope for Nineveh. The message of grace had been preached to them. And they'd listened for a while, but finally they'd rejected it.

But for us it still stands for a warning. Have you read Dickens' book Christmas Carol? There's a terrible scene in that, isn't there, in which Scrooge is given a vision of his own death, his own funeral at which there are no mourners, and his own death bed, in which the only person there is somebody who's trying to steal his sheets on the grounds that he no longer needs them.

That was a warning for Scrooge, and he was given an opportunity to repent in that story, but that is just a story, that's just fiction. And Nineveh for us is just ancient history.

Sure we know it happened, but so long ago, such a different world, the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there. And yet, it's still a warning for us today that there is a time of judgment, there is a destruction of wickedness, and that indeed, there will be rejoicing when that happens.

And so we need to take for our heart for ourselves those words of Jonah, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned. They were given a time of grace and opportunity to repent, and they did for a while, but in the end judgment cannot be put off.

[29 : 12] And so it's a warning to us today, it's a warning for our nation, and it's a warning for us individually to turn back to the living God. Now logic would have suggested that I should have finished with Psalm 58, but I can't, couldn't bring myself to do it.