

God and the Superpower

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- [0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of July 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.
- His sermon is entitled God and the Superpower and is based on Nahum chapter 1 verses 1 to 15.
- Amen.
- Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
- Amen. Amen. Pick on somebody your own size. That's the schoolyard etiquette. If you're going to bully somebody, pick on somebody your own size.
- [1 : 17] Well, if your schoolyard was like mine, people broke that etiquette. It's the same in international politics, of course, and in warfare. Pick on somebody your own size.
- 2,700 years ago, the biggest bully in the world was the nation of Assyria. Assyria ruled the world with brute force and quite a degree of cruelty.
- Assyria's centre was in what is modern day northern Iraq and eastern Turkey in the Middle East. It was a proud empire.
- It waxed and waned a bit. But it was a pretty strong place. Its main capital was a city called Nineveh, which the Bible describes in another place as that great city.
- And he boasted in its displays of power and wealth and grandeur. As it happens, just last Sunday I was in the museum in Copenhagen in Denmark.
- [2 : 20] And there, I was a bit surprised to see, but one great big lion statue that had come from some part of the Assyrian Empire. There are bigger ones, in fact, in the British Museum in London.
- Everything's bigger and better there. And, but these are statues of lions that would have adorned the palaces and major buildings of the ancient Assyrian Empire.
- They are grand, they are a bit forbidding in a sense, but it was a way of that empire declaring and boasting in its power, in its wealth, in the fact that we're the big bully of the world.
- Be careful, you know who you're dealing with. Some of you may have even seen some Assyrian things because there was an exhibition here in Melbourne in the gallery in St Kilda Road about five years ago of Assyrian art and empire it was called.
- Well in the 7th century BC, little old people of God, a nation called Judah at the time, was really a minnow on the world stage.
- [3 : 30] It was not very significant. In fact, at that stage the people of God had been divided into two nations for 200 years. And in 721 towards the end of the 8th century BC, the northern part of the people of God, what was then called Israel, had been soundly defeated by Assyria.
- And the leaders, the wealthy people had been casted off into exile and deportation. Many of the others had been brutally killed and the nation repopulated with other subjects of the Assyrian Empire.

A bit after that time, 20 years later, and through a 20 year period where the southern lot of the people of God, called Judah, were constantly under threat, they were on the verge of extinction.

The Assyrian emperor at that time was a man by the name of Sennacherib. I love some of these Assyrian emperors' names. I think we should reuse them in our own society.

When Warwick and Olive had their baby, I kept telling them that they should call their son Tiglath-Pilazah. They came close with Timothy, but I thought that was a bit tame really.

[4 : 42] Tiglath-Pilazah is a much grander name. But anyway, this man's name was Sennacherib. And under him, the Assyrians had conquered every city of Judah, apart from the capital, Jerusalem.

It was all that was left. And at that time, they boasted that their gods were far greater than the gods of the other nations. Again, elsewhere in the Bible, we can read of their boast.

This is from the book of the prophet Isaiah, a hundred years before Nahum. And the Assyrians are boasting, has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the kingdom of Assyria?

No! Assyria rules the world. Nobody has been able to withstand it. Where are the gods of this country and that country? They're gone.

Those countries are gone, they boast. So who among all the gods of these countries has saved their countries out of my hand? So why should you expect, Judah, the people of God, that your God will do the same?

[5 : 43] It is a great boast. And again, if you go to the British Museum in London, there is a room devoted to the release of the defeats of one of the cities of Judah, Laquish, by Sennacherib in 703 BC.

It is a great boast of their power ruling the world of that day. Although, astonishingly, Jerusalem did not fall. Perhaps though the pinnacle of Assyrian power came in the 7th century when Nahum was preaching.

50 years or so after Sennacherib. At this point, their emperor is called by the fantastic name of Ashurbanipal. Let me dare any of you expecting children or looking forward to having grandchildren to try and get that name into your family.

Ashurbanipal was the Assyrian emperor from 668 to 627, a 40 year period when Assyria was at its peak. Early in his reign, they defeated Egypt, the only other claimant really at that point to world power, and they ruled the world.

Although the little nation of Judah, small, weak, insignificant in political and human terms, remained as a nation. It was fairly much subservient for much of that time to Assyria.

[7 : 03] That is, it didn't do anything that Assyria would not want it to do. It paid money to Assyria to keep it from fighting against it. So it was almost as though it was a nation enslaved to this world power, which represented throughout this 40 years a constant threat to the people of God.

Now it's quite understandable that if you lived in that sort of scenario, then you as a person of God, as an Israelite in the kingdom of Judah, might well ask, where is God?

Where is God? Where are God's promises in this situation? Why is it that we are so small and so threatened, almost subservient, almost enslaved to this world superpower of Assyria that is pagan and idolatrous?

Where is God in all of this? Is it true that the Assyrian hosts, that their gods are better than ours? It's true. Can we even rely on our own God at all?

Well, we might well be tempted in our world to ask similar questions today. Where is our God active in a world that is becoming increasingly pagan, increasingly secular, increasingly following other idols and other religions and other gods, or none at all?

[8 : 24] Where is our God today? Is he idol? Is he weak? Has he abandoned his people or his promises or this world? Well, the opening part of Nahum's book, verses 2 to 8 in chapter 1, is a general statement about the character of God.

He is a very important foundation for understanding what God was doing in Nahum's day, when the Assyrian Empire ruled the world. And it's just as important for us to understand today, when we look around our own world, and see that the forces that seem to prevail in our world, are not usually godly or Christian.

What's God really like? What's God really like? Well, that's Nahum's opening section. And the first thing he says about God is this. A jealous and avenging God is Yahweh, the Lord, that is.

The Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies.

Now, that's an astonishing way to start a description of God. He's jealous. We often think of jealousy as a sin. Often it is. But for God to be jealous, it's saying that he reserves the right for an exclusive allegiance to him.

[9 : 47] If you're married, you can be rightly jealous for the attention and affection of your husband or wife. That is, in a marriage, you are in an exclusive relationship to an extent, so that there is a right place for jealousy.

And God rightly is jealous for the total allegiance of his people. He will tolerate no rivals. Not only that, Nahum declares three times here that the Lord is avenging.

That is, he will wreak vengeance against those who oppose him and his plans and purposes, whether or not they're his people or other people. That is, he will not sit idly by, letting his adversaries do forever what they want.

We're told in that verse that the Lord has rage and wrath against wrongdoers and adversaries and enemies. Now, we might think, well, does that just mean that God's as hot-tempered as I am, for example, that all of a sudden, for no reason at all, I'll fly into a rage and throw things through a window or whatever.

But no, that's not what it's saying about God. His rage and his wrath here is provoked by evil and wrongdoing. It's not as though God is capricious and all of a sudden, for no reason, he's going to be angry at us.

[11 : 07] His anger, wrath, rage is always directed towards evil and wrongdoing. It's a righteous and understandable and deliberate rage and wrath.

Now, that initial description of God in verse 2 offers, at first sight, little comfort for the people of God, Judah. Because it looks to them as though Assyria is getting away with doing whatever they want, which is pagan and idolatrous.

And the people of God are small and inconsequential and fairly much under pressure. So where is the help there? Is it really true that God is avenging? He doesn't seem to be avenging Israel.

So, Nahum goes on to add to this picture of God in verse 3. And the first thing he says about God is that he is slow to anger. Now, we need to understand this expression because it's very important.

God being slow to anger means that he will be angry at sin and evil and wrongdoing, but he will not immediately come down and obliterate all wrongdoing and evil.

[12 : 17] That is, he gives some tolerance or freedom, in Nahum's case, to Assyria to perpetrate its evil and wrongdoing.

But he will one day, finally, wreak his vengeance against it. Now, that's very important to understand how God acts.

That is, he is patient with wrongdoing, slow to retaliate, respond or obliterate it or get rid of it, slow to punish it sometimes. But it certainly does not mean that he won't do it at all.

It explains why in the world there is so much evil going on. It looks at one level to be that God's just sitting back, idle, absent, weak or impotent perhaps.

But not at all. He is biding his time, waiting his time until he brings his vengeance against wrongdoers and evil. It's important to see here that this expression slow to anger means that God will be angry and will respond or retaliate or bring about his vengeance in his time.

[13 : 27] That is, he is patient. It's not that he will sit forever idle. That's not patience. That's indifference. God's not indifferent, but he is patient.

And his slowness to anger is fundamental to his character. Now, often we misunderstand that. See, often people in the world, when they suffer from evil or wrongdoing and they pray and they cry out to God and it seems that God is not answering their prayers, they give up on God.

They say, what's the good of God? He is not answering my prayers. All his wrongdoing is going on. He is not punishing it. But God is slow to anger. And in his time, when it's right for him, he will respond with the vengeance that is righteous.

But sometimes when the shoe is on the other foot, we misunderstand this understanding of God as well. Sometimes, you see, we do our own wrongdoing, our sin or our evil.

And we think, God hasn't come down like a ton of bricks on me. Maybe it's okay. Maybe God actually doesn't care what I do. I'll keep on doing it. And again, we've misunderstood that God is slow to anger.

[14 : 39] For us, when we are wrongdoers, his slowness to anger is actually a sign of great compassion that he gives us time to repent and to turn back to him.

We must not misunderstand that slowness as indifference. Or is God saying, do what you like, it doesn't matter? It does. And though he is slow to anger, when the time is right, he will wreak his vengeance against evil and wrongdoing.

Now, those words about God's character mean this in practice, I suppose. If we are the wrongdoer, don't presume upon God's slowness.

Use the time of his slowness to turn and repent. And if we have been wronged against, if we are the objects of some evil or wrongdoing against us, and we are praying to God for some help or relief or comfort, then God's slowness to anger means that we must trust that in his time, he will indeed bring the justice that is right.

And we must continue on, often in the face of lengthy wrongdoing or evil and suffering, to keep on trusting that God will indeed bring his vengeance in his time.

[16 : 06] Now, the description of God is not yet complete here. Nahum's next expression is also important. The Lord is slow to anger, verse 3 begins, but great in power.

And again, that is important for us as we relate to God. The people of God in Nahum's day, the nation of Judah, was a minnow, inconsequential in world politics, in the years of the middle of the 7th century BC.

Humanly, it was like Assyria being a year 12 student bullying a little prep boy on his first day in school in the schoolyard.

But not only is the Lord's slow to anger, he's great in power. And what that is saying is that in the end, no bully, no matter how big they are, how powerful they are, and Assyria was the biggest and most powerful of all, the Lord is great in power.

So if you're a prep student being bullied by a year 12, there's not much point and not much comfort if another prep person comes up to sort of back you up. You're both going to get bashed up probably.

[17 : 17] But what this is telling the people of God suffering oppression here is that you may be small and Assyria may be vast in its power, but God is greater in power.

And all the wealth and splendour and might of the Assyrian Empire, which is even still on display in our age in various museums in the world, is nothing compared to the power of God himself.

You see, Assyria, when it was picking on Judah and threatening Judah, thought it could have its way, it's just a pawn, it could move it around the board just as it pleased. But when it picked on the people of God, it was picking on their God.

And they didn't realise, the Assyrians didn't realise just who they were picking a fight with. Nahum goes on to say what this greatness of God's power is like.

The Assyrian Empire might be strong, but look at what the Lord's power is described as in the rest of verse 3 and verses 4 and 5. His way is in whirlwind and storm and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

[18 : 30] That is the mighty forces of nature which, even for us, are sometimes terrifying. That's as though God's just sort of stretching his toes in the dust. Our toes and our feet are not usually the strongest part of our body.

But God is so great that all that fierce storm of whirlwind, storm and clouds, it's just like the end of God's feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry and dries up all the rivers.

That's how strong God is. It's echoing, of course, the drying up of the Red Sea, when again the inconsequential people of God, the Israelites under Moses, fled from the world's superpower of that day, Egypt, towards the Promised Land, some centuries before Nathan.

Bashan and Carmel wither, the bloom of Lebanon fades. They were the archetypal fertile lush areas of the land of Israel and Judah. Bashan had the biggest of the cattle, Carmel was where wine and many crops were from, the land was lush, Lebanon was renowned for its trees and its fertility of ground as well.

God can make all that wither, that's how strong, how powerful this Lord is. The mountains quake before him and the hills melt. A fairly terrifying idea of the power of God over creation.

[19 : 50] Why, verse 5 finishes, Even the earth heaves before him, the world and all who live in it. Well might the people of Israel and Judah have been saying, Who can stand in the face of the might of Assyria?

But what Nahum has described about God here, makes us say, Who can stand in the face of God? He goes on to ask that question in verse 6, a rhetorical question. Who can stand before his indignation? Nobody can.

Who can endure the heat of his anger? Nobody can. His rock is poured out like fire and by him the rocks are broken in pieces. The rhetorical question is to engage the listener and to make them realise that God actually is more powerful than Assyria.

He's not acting now and intervening right now, not because he's indifferent or weak or impotent or absent, but because he's slow to anger. But he's great in power. And in his time he will act and right the wrongs.

Now such an awesome catalogue of the power of God would even make Judah, the people of God, tremble.

[21 : 03] It may not offer them initially much comfort. I mean if God's so greater than Assyria, well he's so much greater than us, we can't even stand. And that's why verse 7 balances again verse 6.

The Lord is good. A stronghold in a day of trouble. He protects those who take refuge in him.

This almighty God, the one who avenges wrongdoing, the one whose wrath is furious and fierce, the one who is great in power yet slow to anger, is a refuge for those who take refuge in him.

He's the protector in the world's school ground. And his enemies will not escape his wrath. It's not as though God comes alongside little old Judah and lets Assyria just flee off into other parts of the world to do what it wants.

Verse 8 tells us that Assyria cannot escape. Even in a rushing flood he will make a full end of his adversaries and will pursue his enemies into darkness. They can't escape. Assyria's end is coming.

[22 : 13] And this almighty God who is great in power is a refuge for those who turn to him for refuge.

Now what Nahum has described in these verses is a foundation stone to understand the character of God. His description is consistent thoroughly with the descriptions of God as we find him in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

It's not as though God has changed. And what he describes about God here is very important for us today as well. You see, a God who is not sovereign in power cannot punish wrongdoing.

A God who is not sovereign in power cannot protect those who turn to him for refuge. But also a God who is not good will not punish.

And a God who is not good will not protect those who turn to him for refuge. God is both sovereign in power and good, which means that he both can and will punish wrongdoing, and he both can and will provide refuge for those who turn to him.

[23 : 36] Now lots of Christians today, lots of Christian leaders even I must confess today, like to think that God is just love in the sense that he's like a great big old grandfather figure who's never got a crossword for anyone, who will always sit benignly cheerful, patting us on the back and saying, you're okay, you're doing well.

That is not the Bible's God. And that God is not good. And that God in the end is not loving. And that God in the end is not great in power and sovereign.

And that God is not worth turning to for refuge. You see, only the God that Nahum describes, that the Bible tells us about from beginning to end, is worth trusting.

A God who is both sovereign in power and good. A God who is slow to anger. A God who avenges wrongdoing. And that alone is the sort of God worth trusting.

Because any trust that is placed in him will not be led astray, not be let down. He will be good and reliable as a refuge.

[24 : 52] He will be fierce against wrongdoing, but compassionately slow in his anger. And for the people of Judah, little old Judah in the 7th century BC, facing the might of Assyria on all its borders, they needed this view of God to be right in their minds, if they were to live on in their international situation.

And so too for us. Now, Nahum has laid a foundation here for the rest of his book. It is about the threat of Assyria and what God will do.

A God who is great in power, slow to anger. A God who is a reliable refuge. He goes on now to apply those opening words to his immediate situation.

He does it in an intriguing way that is hard to understand at first, because it is hard to quite work out who has been spoken to and about in the verses that follow this.

In verse 9 and 10 and 11, he addresses Assyria firstly. Why do you, Assyria, plot against the Lord? He will make an end. No adversary will rise up twice.

[26 : 04] Like thorns, they are entangled. Like drunkards, they're drunk, they're consumed like dry straw. He's saying about Assyria here that they think they're independent, that they're in control, but in fact they're not. They're entangled in their own thorns and nests.

They're almost drunkards on the wrath of God, and therefore they're vulnerable to his anger. They're not in control of themselves, and they're consumed, or will be, by dry straw where nothing's left.

No remnant will escape. From you, from Assyria, one has gone out who plots evil against the Lord. Maybe speaking in particular about the emperor, Ashavarapah, who counts his wickedness.

In attacking Judah, Assyria is taking on more than it ever expected. It thought that its statues of lions around its palaces were fairly great and fearful, but what it's actually doing in attacking Judah is attacking the lion of Judah, their God.

And that is a lion whose roar is much worse than the stone statues of Assyria today. Then Nahum turns to the people of God. Verse 12 and 13.

[27 : 09] Thus says the Lord, though they, Assyria, are at full strength, and many, they'll be cut off and cast away. Though I have afflicted you, I'll afflict you no more. And now I'll break off his yoke from you and snap the bonds that bind you.

Words of great comfort about God who's been slow to anger. After all, Assyria has been rampant for 150 years or so on the world's scene. God is going to bring an end to them, he says.

Now, Nahum here is not just sort of reading carefully the political comments in the local newspapers and saying, I can see the seeds of destruction politically. Because at the time when he's speaking, Assyria is at full strength.

That's what verse 12 says. They are at full strength and many. But he is saying what is almost unimaginable humanly, that Assyria will come to an end.

And within 50 years of these words, it had happened. Nineveh had fallen. All the major cities of Assyria had fallen. By 610 BC, Assyria was no more. And Babylon was now the world's superpower.

[28 : 15] God is slow to wake up. He's let Assyria run rampant for years. But it's not indifference. And God will act in his time indeed.

Then he turns back to Assyria in verse 14. Maybe even directly to the emperor Ashurbanipal. The Lord has commanded concerning you, Assyria, or its king, your name shall be perpetuated no longer.

That's the first of three things. Now that's a fairly atrocious thing for a king in the ancient world. We all know how King Henry VIII, the king of England in Tudor times, wanted to have a son as his heir.

Explains why he had quite a few wives. Well, the same in the ancient world as well. If you were the emperor or the king and you died without issue, without a male heir, it was the end of the dynasty.

It was some disgrace. God is saying that the Assyrian emperor will not have descendants after him. Secondly, about Assyria, the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the cast image.

[29 : 28] Their idols, their statues. That's what Assyria did to the nations it conquered. It destroyed all their religious shrines. And God is saying, I'll do the same to you. And he did. And the Assyrian shrines were all destroyed.

And thirdly, I'll make your grave, I'll bury you. That's your end. No more life for the nation of Assyria. It's true, there's no Assyria today. No Assyrian people today.

They're the three things that God had said he would do to Assyria in his time. The God who is slow to anger, but he will vent his anger and vent his loss.

And he did. And then finally, the chapter ends with Nahum turning back to the people of God. From Assyria to Judah, back to Assyria, and now back to Judah again.

In words that are dramatic, a climax, a culmination of this chapter in effect. Look! On the mountains, the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace.

[30 : 26] Celebrate your festivals, O Judah. Fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked invade you. They are utterly cut off. Words that at least initially echo the prophet Isaiah from a hundred years earlier.

God never promises instant relief from our suffering, our pain or our enemies. In our world, like perhaps in Nahum's world, the people of God often suffer.

Suffer badly at the hands of others. I heard just a few days ago that in this world in which we live, over 80 countries persecute Christians today.

In Australia, the opposition to the Christian faith is no less real, despite the fact that usually our lives are not a threat for our Christian faith. The multiculturalism of our society, which has so many good things about it, also brings pressures to bear to deny the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The growing immorality and secularism in our society tempts us to play down the fact that God is moral and will judge. And those who suffer for their faith are often tempted to think that God is indeed absent, weak, impotent.

[31 : 50] But look, verse 15 says, on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace. In Nahum's time as in ours, the instruction is to look, to look up and to look ahead to the one who is coming.

For Nahum in his time, looking forward to one who would bring peace. Six hundred years later he came. He lived. He died. For us though, it's to look up and ahead as well.

Yes, we can look back to Jesus who came and lived and died, the Prince of Peace, as predicted in the Old Testament. But he's coming again. And that is what we are to look for and long for and wait for in our lives.

Tonight, to the same Prince of Peace who is coming back for all the world to see as the judge of all. Yes, the Lord is slow to anger, but Jesus is definitely coming.

And though 2,000 years after his first coming, he is yet to come, does not mean that God's abandoned and given up. Slow, perhaps, in human terms, but certain indeed is his second coming.

[33 : 01] And on the day when he comes again, the one who on the mountains are the feet of one who brings good tidings and proclaims peace. On that day when he comes, the wrath of God will be vented in no terms less fierce than we've seen in Nahum.

Read the book of Revelation to see what that day will be like. It will be a terrifying day. Who will stand indeed before the fierce wrath of the Lamb of God on that final day?

But the book of Revelation, like elsewhere in the New Testament, also tells us what Nahum tells us. That on that final day, when the judge of all comes, those who stand will be those who seek refuge in him.

We, in our day and age, have the benefit of being able to look back to Jesus as well as looking forward to him. Looking back to Jesus on the cross, we see this same God at work.

A God who is slow to anger, but nonetheless wreaks his vengeance against sin and evil and wrongdoing, and it's that that took Jesus to the cross, and it's why he died. But we look to the same cross to find refuge for those who turn to him for refuge, for protection.

[34 : 22] You see, we see in the cross this same God at work, the God who is great in power, the God who is slow to anger, and the God who is good and is a reliable refuge.

And on the final day when Jesus returns, it's the same God who's coming again, whose fierce wrath against evil will be seen by every eye.

But also for those who place their trust and refuge in him, they will find indeed a reliable refuge, sure protection.

A God without wrath is a terrible deception. A God who is not sovereign is a counterfeit haven.

But a God who is sovereign, who is great in power, who does avenge his enemies, though slow to anger, is a God worth trusting.

[35 : 29] Even in the midst of ongoing pain, persecution, oppression, difficulty, strife, whatever. He is a God who in his time will certainly and finally bring the justice that is required, the vengeance that is required, and the protection and refuge that we long for.

Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus.

Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus.