

How the Mighty have Fallen

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 14th of July 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled How the Mighty Have Fallen and is based on Nahum 3.1-19.

I encourage you to turn in the Bibles in the pews to page 760 to Nahum chapters 2 and 3. Last week I preached on Nahum chapter 1, this week the remaining two chapters.

These are not easy to understand. So let's pray first that God will help us. Oh God, we thank you that you have spoken through the ages through your prophets and still speak through them today to us.

We pray that you'll give us clarity of understanding this morning, not just for our minds' sake, but so that our lives may be lived in repentance and faithful obedience to you and for the glory of your name in this world.

[1 : 1 3] Amen. September the 11th was almost an unthinkable act. The world's superpower, perhaps even at the height of its power, without real rival or superpower in our world, brought to its knees.

The impregnable, so-called, national security of the United States of America breached, it seems, so easily. And buildings that reeked of awesome human power and achievement suddenly collapsing before our very eyes.

And of course the reverberations of that event are still felt in every country, really, in our world today. It's not always easy to read the hand of God active in our world.

Sometimes it's easier as Christians to retreat into our holy huddle of our minds and to keep God within our grasp in our private devotions and in our Sunday worship.

But when we survey the complex, complicated, confusing world in which we live and the various machinations of nations and political beings in our world, it's hard to see sometimes whether and how God is active.

[2 : 2 9] It's hard sometimes to keep believing that God is sovereign. It's easy to question whether God ever intervenes at all in our world today.

And it's right, perhaps, to ask what is God's view of the nations, both pre- and post-September 11 last year. Nahum was a prophet of God in about 660 BC or thereabouts.

And he has lessons for us on these sorts of matters. The lessons that the prophet Nahum teaches are not lessons from history. That is, he's not just observing past events and telling us what we should learn from them in order to be ready for the same sorts of things that might happen in the future.

But Nahum was a prophet and therefore the lessons that he has for us are fundamentally lessons about God and what God is on about and how God is on about what he's on about in our world.

In the days of Nahum, 660 BC, the world's superpower without rival was the Empire of Assyria. It was a mighty empire. And in the years just before Nahum was speaking these words from God, the Empire of Assyria had defeated, surprisingly, its only claimant really to the throne of world superpower, Egypt.

[3 : 57] And the capital of Egypt in those days, indeed it had been for 1400 years, was the city of Thebes. The Arab name for that city of Thebes is Karnak and Luxor. It's about 300 miles upstream from Cairo or south of Cairo in Egypt.

A grand city whose ruins are still spectacular today. It's there that we find temples of various gods, in particular the god Ammon, and it's there too that you find the valley of the kings, the tombs of many of the great pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

But in 663, surprisingly, it was defeated by the Assyrians. And now Assyria ruled alone, the only real superpower of the ancient world.

And its capital was Nineveh, that great city as it is called in scripture. And Nineveh, ancient Nineveh, boasted in the various Assyrian victories.

It boasted in it because of the inscriptions that have been found even in modern times of the emperor Ashurbanipal. He was their emperor at the time. His archives have recounted the victories of the Assyrians.

[5 : 11] In the palaces of Nineveh, there were reliefs on the walls that portrayed in pictorial form, some of which are in the British Museum in London, some of the great victories of the Assyrians.

And in the treasuries of the palaces and government offices were the riches and wealth plundered from the conquered nations. Nineveh had an eight-mile defensive wall around it, between 25 and 60 foot high.

Nineveh was about 250 miles up the Tigris River from where Baghdad is today. And there are ruins of the palaces, the arsenal of the army, the walls, and the stone lions, massive stone lions, the emblem of the empire of Assyria that guarded its palaces.

This was a place to reckon with. This was the capital of the world's superpower. And its lion's roar reverberated around the ancient world.

The world was afraid of Assyria. But in comparison to the lion's roar of Assyria, there was the squeak of the mouse of the prophet Nahum in reply.

[6 : 33] From pipsqueak Judah, the people of God, a more or less inconsequential fragment of a nation that was left in 660 BC. Assyria will fall.

And soon was the voice of this little mouse Nahum. Mrs. Nahum must have thought her husband had gone mad. Nobody could predict that Assyria was soon to fall.

How? Where? When? It was totally unlikely that this world superpower that looks so impregnable could fall to anyone. If Mrs. Nahum thought her husband was mad, his friends probably thought he was in some Peter Sellers comedy, *The Mouse That Roared*.

But Nahum was serious, and he was serious because he was speaking the word of the Lord, unlikely though it seemed to be in his day and age. Chapters 2 and 3 are vivid in their portrayal of the battle that will destroy Nineveh in time to come.

They are scathing in their denunciation of the nation and they're full of sarcasm and mockery at Assyria's pride. The attack on Assyria is announced at the beginning of chapter 2 on page 760.

[7 : 48] A shatterer has come up against you. And then comes the instruction to the Assyrians to get ready. Guard the ramparts, watch the road, gird your loins, collect all your strength.

Come on Assyria, get ready, you're going to be attacked by someone in some future time. Now Nahum, as I said, is not just a political analyst. It's not that he's tried to analyse the politics and reckons this is a sure bet.

He's speaking God's word and the reason why he's certain is that because God is behind it. And so he says in verse 2, the reason for all this happening and being announced is that the Lord is restoring the majesty of Jacob as well as the majesty of Israel.

Though ravagers have ravaged them and ruined their branches. That is the people of God, here called Jacob and Israel, their majesty is going to be restored to them. And in the end, their majesty is God himself.

He is the majesty of his people. And so what God is doing is not just for the sake of his people to restore them because they themselves have been ravaged. But actually it's God being on about the reputation of his name in the world.

[8 : 57] His honour is at stake. And when his people are ravaged and look as though they're about to be destroyed, the reputation of God goes down the gurgler with them. So God is on about his own reputation in the world.

And that's why he's going to bring a superpower to its knees in order to restore his majesty to his people in the world for all the world to see. Well then comes the vivid description of battle from verse 3 onwards.

And this chapter, like the next chapter, are full of little broken phrases to create the sense of the chaotic frenzy of battle. The shields of his warriors are red, his soldiers are clothed in crimson.

And 50 years later, when Nineveh falls, it's to the Babylonians and their army dressed in red. The metal on the chariots flashes on the day when he musters them. The chargers prance.

The chariots race madly through the streets. They rush to and fro through the squares. Their appearance is like torches. They dart like lightning. And then they attempt to besiege the city or to breach its wall.

[10 : 04] So verse 5 says that he calls his officers. They stumble as they come forward in their haste, that is, it seems. And they hasten to the wall and the mantlet or the covering is set up. That is, on top of the wall would be the Assyrian defence.

They'd be hurling down all sorts of things on the invading army. So they set up their covering of shields so that underneath them they're protected and they can try and somehow breach the wall or create the siege around the city of Nineveh.

But the next verse seems to imply that Nineveh, though impregnable and strong, seems to fall so quickly. The river gates are opened and the palace trembles.

The city that's meant to be strong is suddenly conquered. Verse 6 implies. And so in verse 7 it's decreed, that is, it's God's hand behind all this.

It's not just the machinations of politics and nations. It is decreed that the city be exiled. As it had happened by Assyria to their conquered nations, so it will happen to Assyria in return.

[11 : 06] The wealthy, the leaders, the government, the king, the emperor, the armies, they'd be carted off to other places in exile, kept in effect in a sort of prison-type environment or refugee-type camp where they'll no longer represent a threat to the conquerors.

The slave women would be led away moaning like doves and beating their breasts in mourning and grief. And then comes a description of Nineveh that you would not expect.

This vast and strong city wets itself with fear. Nineveh's like a pool whose waters run away. The Assyrians thought it was a strong city that could resist anything, but rather Nahum says the reality is there's just like a pool of water that just dissipates off into the ground.

That's how fearful Nineveh will be on the day that it is attacked in the future. Halt, halt, says some voice, but no one turns back. Everybody just flees with fear.

And then comes the voice of the conquerors. Plunder the silver, plunder the gold. There's no end of treasure, an abundance of every precious thing. And of course the reason for that is that in the Assyrian treasuries were the wealth of all the cities that they'd conquered.

[12 : 19] Thebes most recently. But there'd be even treasure from Jerusalem there probably. Because though Jerusalem and Judah was a nation still not conquered by Assyria, the reason for that was it was paying heavy taxes from its treasuries and temple treasure in order to stave off any Assyrian threat.

The Assyrian treasuries were full of the wealth of the ancient world because of all the conquered nations round about. And in the end, devastation, desolation and destruction.

Hearts faint, knees tremble, all loins quake, all faces grow pale. Nineveh is indeed a bowl of quivering jelly in the face of whoever will conquer it.

Now that's an extraordinary description of a world superpower. Remember that it's at the height of its power that Nahum speaks. We saw that last week. It's not as though this is an empire that's now on the way and therefore what he says is fairly likely.

He's speaking about the world superpower that looks invincible. But no, he says, in reality it'll be devastated, a bowl of quivering jelly.

[13 : 29] And chapter 2 finishes with a mocking taunt of this great empire marked by the symbol of the lion. What's become of the lion's den, the cave of the young lions where the lion goes and the lion's cubs with no one to disturb them?

God, what's happened to your great and ferocious army and capital city that no one would dare try to conquer because it's like a lion's den full of hungry lions?

It's gone. Desolated, devastated and destroyed. The lion's torn enough for his whelps and strangled prey for his lionesses. He's filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh.

It's saying, in effect, that Assyria's conquests and cruelty against other peoples has come to the brim and come to the top. There's no room for more. It's about to fall apart.

And the reason for this, of course, is not because of some stronger army that'll come on the scene. It's because of God. It's God's hand. So verse 13, see, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts.

[14 : 37] I will burn your chariots in smoke and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth. I, I, I, God, God, God.

He's the one with whom Assyria has to reckon and they cannot stand against him on that day. No more will be heard the voice of the Assyrian messengers at the end of the chapter.

That is, the messengers who go out into the world to gather all the taxes that the nations have to pay, they'll be gone. There'll be no more threat to the people of God in Judah. The denunciation continues into chapter 3.

The city of Nineveh, the great city, is in fact described firstly as the city of bloodshed, literally murder. Secondly, it's described as utterly deceitful. That is, it's a corrupt government that is centred there and the reason for its deceit is probably to do with the fact that they would form international alliances and treaties and try to butter up the other nations but then deceive them so that they would loot and pillage them and suppress them under their own dominion.

And thirdly, the city is described as full of booty, no end to the plunder. If you like that, the manifestation of their deceit is all the plunder they've got from the nations around about. Well, the description of battle continues but now it reaches a climax.

[16 : 01] Again, the sentences are crisp and short creating the sense of chaotic frenzy of war, the crack of whip, the rumble of wheel, galloping horse, bounding chariot, horsemen charging, flashing sword, glittering spear and then most macabre of all, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end, they stumble over the bodies.

This is a gruesome picture indeed. Bodies piled upon bodies in fallen Nineveh, the city that was populated by so many thousands and thousands, now lifeless and full of corpses.

Why? Because of all their treachery and deceit in dealing with other nations. Verse 4, because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, the mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries and peoples through her sorcery.

This is a city that has deceived others, allured them into an alliance, but then turned their back on them and stabbed them in the back. It's not unusual that a city in scripture gets called a prostitute as Nineveh does here.

Babylon, the same description will apply to it. And then ultimately at the end of the scriptures in the book of Revelation, the same to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire of that day. But it's a word that's applied not just to the pagan cities that are enemies of God's people, for on a bad day the same word gets applied to the city of Jerusalem, God's people.

[17 : 39] A whore, a prostitute, because it has abandoned its own God and gone after other gods. See, God is against those cities and those places and towns that turn their back on him to serve other gods, full of deceit and full of murder, full of bloodshed, full of debauchery and immorality.

And Nineveh faces the judgment of God for such sins. As a result, not only will it be destroyed, it will be publicly humiliated. Shame will be brought upon it.

So carrying on the metaphor of this being the prostitute city, verse 5 says, I am against you, says the Lord God of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face. I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame.

I'll throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. It's a bit like those medieval stocks and pillories that are still found in the city town squares and village squares of some English towns where no doubt the witches and those who'd done wrong would be put in the stocks and left to be on public display for a day so people could mock them or throw things at them and they'd be humiliated for whatever they'd done wrong.

So too will it happen to Assyria, not only destroyed but degraded and humiliated in public. And more than that, in verse 7, all who see you will shrink from you and say, Nineveh is devastated.

[19 : 10] who will bemoan her? Where shall I seek comforters for you? The description is saying in effect that at the death or at the burial of this city of Nineveh, who will be found to mourn?

No one. There's nothing sadder than a funeral that nobody attends. And that will be the case for Nineveh. Nineveh.

This is the invincible city that Nahum is speaking about. It's ancient New York or London or Paris or Moscow, Tokyo, whatever. And this is a city that will be destroyed and humiliated.

And no one will mourn its loss. It boasted that it was the greatest city of the world, especially after defeating Thebes a few years earlier. Verse 8, are you better than Thebes?

Well, Thebes, it sat by the Nile with water around her, rampart a sea, water her wall. That was almost impregnable. Everybody thought it had been the capital of Egypt for 1400 years. Not only that, but Egypt was in an alliance with all these countries.

[20 : 15] Ethiopia was her strength, Egypt too, and that without limit. Put and the Libyans were her helpers. That was the city above all cities. Now it's gone. Are you better than it? Is what Nahum is asking rhetorically.

And then in his answer he implies, no, you're not better than it. For what happened to her, Thebes, will happen to you too. She became an exile, she went into captivity, even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street, lots were cast for her nobles, all her dignitaries were bound in fetters.

And then what is implicit in that verse is made explicit in the next. You also, Nineveh, here's the sting in the tail, you Nineveh, the great city, will be drunken, unable to defend yourself, totally out of control.

And you'll go into hiding, you'll seek a refuge from the enemy. And then it says in verse 12, all your fortresses are like fig trees with first ripe figs.

If shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater. They thought their fortress would never fall, that would stand against any enemy. But no, Nahum says, it's so weak, it's like a tree that is full of ripe fruit.

[21 : 24] Just a gentle breeze or gust and the fruit will come falling down. All you need here is a little army that comes up against you and all of a sudden Nineveh will fall apart. Same sort of thing in verse 13.

Mocking the army of Assyria. Look at your troops. They're women in your midst. When I was at Scotch College as a student, we used to mock the other boys' schools that we played rugby or football or cricket or rowing against, calling them carey fairies or you're just girls.

Well, that's what's being said here about the army of Assyria. They're just girls. There's no strength there. They're pathetic. The gates of your land are wide open to your foes.

Fire has devoured the bars of your gates. You think you're strong but your fortress will fall. Your army's just women and your gates, they can't keep anybody out. And then with reeking of sarcasm, Nahum encourages them to try and get ready for battle.

Draw water for the siege, strengthen your forts, trample the clay, tread the mortar, take hold of the brick mould. But it's sarcastic because it won't do any good. Verse 15, there the fire will devour you.

[22 : 40] The sword will cut you off. It doesn't matter how much effort you put into getting ready for battle. You're going to fall. And you can do nothing about it.

And the enemy, the middle of verse 15 says, will devour you like the locust. Like a locust plague. It'll come along and you'll all be gone, nothing left. Now then comes some more mockery.

Assyria is encouraged to multiply itself like the locust or like the grasshopper at the end of verse 15. But the mockery is that as it does so and becomes numerous like locusts, the similarity to locusts is not that they'll be able to be like a plague and destroy.

Simply that they'll fly away in fear. You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens. The locust shed its skin and flies away. Your guards are like grasshoppers.

Your scribes like swarms of locusts. But not to attack. Sitting on the fences on a cold day but when the sun rises they fly away and no one knows where they've gone. That's mocking the Assyrian army, the Assyrian economy, both merchants in verse 16 and the guards in verse 17.

[23 : 54] They're nothing. They'll be fearful. They'll just flee and fly away. And the leaders, the king himself, they're no better. Verse 18.

Your shepherds, the leaders of the people, they're asleep. It might suggest that they're exhausted from all this fighting. It might suggest that they're lazy and incompetent. It could even refer to the fact that in the end they're dead.

O king of Assyria, your noble slumber, your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. And then this is the end. Verse 19.

There is no assuaging your hurt. Your wound is mortal. This is terminal. This is the end of the nation. Nothing you can do can stop it.

In Nahum's day as he spoke these words, Assyria looked invincible and ruled the world. There was no suggestion that it was about to fall.

[24 : 53] But in 50 years time it was gone. 612 BC, Babylon stormed Nineveh. And Nineveh was no more and its ruins today are all that remains.

What God says he'll do, no matter how unlikely it is, he does. And his word can be trusted. And the voice of Nahum spoke the unlikely truth that the superpower's days were numbered.

Now we may well cringe at the harshness of these words of Nahum. Does not the Bible teach us that our God is somehow more compassionate than this?

Is he really as bloodthirsty as what we read in these chapters of Nahum? But remember that this is the same city, Nineveh, to whom God sent his prophet Jonah to preach repentance.

They repented quickly but it seems that the repentance in the day of Jonah some years before Nahum was particularly short-lived. You see, they've had their chance and they've spurned it.

[26 : 03] But nor should we doubt that God's wrath is undeserved as somehow this description of battle and bloodshed and piles of corpses is a little bit of God going over the top. Remember, this is a nation that boasted in its atrocities.

You can see it today in the pictures in the British Museum of the release of their defeats of some towns. They gloried not just in victory but they gloried in the gory victories that they won.

In impaling people on spears and blasting off their heads and dashing children against the rocks and so on. This was a proud, merciless, evil empire opposed to God.

And such practices as they practiced in any day or age always invite the judgment of God and his wrath against them. God is slow to anger as we saw last week.

But angry he will be always at the evils and atrocities that people like the Assyrians commit. And in our day and age the same is true. Though it may look from time to time that God is sitting back idle or impotent as the world's atrocities seem to mount up.

[27 : 11] God's anger against those who perpetrate such evil is the same as it was against the Assyrians so many centuries ago. In his time he will wreak his vengeance and punishment as he said in the time of Nahum.

Notice too that for God's people, the people of Judah, this was not a call for them to rise up against their oppressors and conquer them or defeat them.

Not at all. Their job was to sit back and trust these words of Nahum that God would bring about an end to Nineveh as he promised to.

And to patiently endure whatever suffering came their way as they waited for the future day of the Lord. Notice too that there's no place here for smug satisfaction for the people of God.

Though there is rejoicing at the end of the third chapter at the demise of Assyria, there is no smug complacency thinking we're better than you. You've got your comeuppance.

[28 : 14] There may be rejoicing at the vindication of God when his enemies are put down. But no place for thinking somehow we are better. Because within 25 years of the end of Nineveh, Jerusalem fell for many of the same sorts of sins.

God is consistent against such sin and evil whether committed and perpetrated by pagans or his people. Assyria boasted in its achievements both on the army field and in its buildings and temples.

And its boasts are a warning to us today too. Confidence in human strength, human skill, human ability or ingenuity is in the end misplaced and ill-founded.

For all its boasted pomp and show, it was temporary and frail. September 11 reminded us of that again. But the Bible ends with a description of a greater city that will last, that is eternal and the trust placed in it is rightly placed.

It is a city built by God, not man, kind. It is perfected by God. As we look around our world it is easy to doubt the activity of God and easy to question his sovereign care of people and nations.

[29 : 44] The rise of paganism, the rise of boastful immorality, the rise of atrocities, the boastfulness of humanity in general. But Nahum in the context of scripture reminds us that we, like the Assyrians, all stand under the coming judgment and wrath of God.

He's slow to anger but he is certain in coming to judge this world. Well may we ask who can stand on such a day if Nineveh couldn't, who could? And the answer is none.

No one. Except by the grace of God extended to us in Jesus Christ. Well may we pray then. Come Lord Jesus.

Let's pray. Grant almighty God that as we have heard now of punishments so dreadful denounced on all tyrants and plunderers that this warning may keep us within the limits of justice so that none of us may abuse our power to oppress the innocent but on the contrary strive to benefit one another and wholly regulate ourselves according to the rule of equity.

Amen.