

Nahum 3

December 2, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

Rev. R.C. Janssen

Read: Nahum 3

Psalms 58:1,2,3,4,5 (all)

During sermon: Revelation 18: 18:1-8, 19:1-3, 11-21

Text: Nahum 3

Amen-song: Psalm 69:6,8,11

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, the prophecy of Nahum is not a favourite prophet because of its subject matter. It deals with the destruction of Nineveh and Assyria; a destruction that is described in a most graphic and gruesome way. One cringes as one reads through, especially, Nahum 3. Is this kind of talk appropriate for the Christian era?

The same sort of thing is true for quite a number of the Psalms. Most of the Psalms we are singing this service are among the least popular. We cringe as we sing. We avoid them, because of what they sing about. The songs that contain curses, the prophecies that speak of violence, we'd rather push them aside. Recently, at an evening on the Psalms, it was noted how one of the greatest hymn writers of the English language, Isaac Watts, wrote hymns because the psalms were considered too negative. Some will argue, vengeance is an Old Testament practice, forgiveness is the New Testament practice. But no. Those who take Scripture seriously, all of Scripture, will realize that there is a unity. Vengeance is throughout Scripture. I hope that becomes clear as we begin this morning with Nahum 3 and will end in the prophecy of Jesus Christ Himself, with Revelation 18 and 19.

How should one understand the curses and violence found in Scripture? Recently I heard it said that when it comes to the curses in the Psalms, one should not see these as displays of a desire for personal vengeance, but as a prayer for divine justice. Yes, that's a first thing we need to realize. Nahum 3 is not about personal vengeance or national vengeance. It is about God's vengeance upon a nation that had spurned His mercy and love. Spurned His mercy and love...

Remember, boys and girls, that God had threatened to overturn Nineveh once before? That was in the days of Jonah. But it hadn't happened. For Nineveh repented. However, a good century later, in the days of Nahum, things were even worse than in the days of Jonah. Nineveh had returned to her evil ways and now the measure of her sin was full. God's mercy had been rejected. God's ways of love and righteousness were avoided. Assyria was an arrogant empire, a cruel nation. The banquet hall of Sennacherib was decorated with pictures of trees and hanging from the trees were not delicious fruits but the heads of conquered kings. Assyria lived a life, not of selfless love and justice, but of selfish pride and violence.

It is when God's love goes unanswered, when God's care and mercy are not reflected, it's when people fail to respect God's will and kingdom and honour, that's when God's jealousy seeks vengeance, that's when His anger begins to burn. Assyria had been appointed by God as an instrument of discipline. But it had a mind of its own, and given itself a greater role, a more violent role (Isaiah 10:5-19). When the measure of her sin was full, when God said "enough is enough", then Assyria would suffer: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, she would receive what she had dished out.

The same would be true for those who spurn and reject the greatest expression of God's love: the sending of God's only-begotten Son into this world as a human for the salvation of humanity and of the world, to proclaim love and to bring about love. God is a patient God, long-suffering, slow-to-anger. But there comes a point in time when God will say: enough is enough. The measure of sin is now full. Those who continue in the wicked ways of selfishness and violence will themselves experience what they do to others.

The curses and violence found in the Psalms and Prophets proclaim God's vengeance when His love goes unanswered.

We hear the Word of God summarized with this theme: God confirms the certainty of the enemy's downfall. We will consider (1) the downfall of Assyria; and (2) the downfall of all God's enemies.

1. The downfall of Assyria

Nahum was a prophet in Judah, a country that had basically been reduced to a city state. He prophesied of the downfall of Nineveh, the world's greatest city, ruling the world's largest empire. He did so as Assyria had reached a height of power. From being one of several forces in the Middle East it had become the dominant super-power. Under King Ashurbanipal Egypt had been defeated after a brief rebellion, Chaldean Babylon had been subdued, and even Susa, the capital city of the Medes had been taken.

Nahum's word seemed laughable. It's like saying today that within a decade or two the USA, China, or Russia will no longer exist, will be wiped of the map. Who would believe that?

It was to confirm the truth of Nahum's prophecy concerning the destruction of Nineveh that there is a third prophecy in Nahum. Here God not only has Nahum describe *what* will happen, but *why* it will happen, why it *can* happen, why it will *most certainly* happen.

There are basically three reasons. First, the greatness of Nineveh's sin and violence warrant her destruction. Second, Nineveh might be the greatest city on earth with a "Palace without Rival", that doesn't make her unconquerable. Third, the strength of the Assyrians is not what it seems. Let's wend our way through Nahum 3 to trace these three reasons.

The greatness of Nineveh's sin and violence warrant her destruction. That's Nahum 3:1 through 7. Nineveh is a bloody city. Given the Hebrew original, "bloody" might well read "bloodiest" in English. Nineveh sheds blood beyond compare. The violence with which she acts is unmatched. It is a city full of deceit and plunder. First there's the sweet talk "Be part of our nation and we will make life good for you" and then, once a nation joined the Assyrians, it would be plundered. We have a record of how this went when it comes to Judah. Tiglath-Pilezer tried it in the days of King Ahaz (2Chron 28:20), and King Sennacherib again in the days of King Hezekiah (2Kings 18:31-32). Maybe you know the rhyme: "Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly." Or the Dutch saying: "When the fox preaches the suffering, farmer, watch your chickens."¹ Lies, to suck you in and then suck you dry.

Verse 4 paints a very graphic picture. Nineveh is a beguiling prostitute that practices witchcraft. No respect for people and no respect for God. For Nineveh everything was about self-gratification in a most evil way. When Jonah prophesied, Nineveh had known what repentance looked like. She had known what was good and right and proper. No more.

Thus God's reaction will be in like kind. In verse 2 and 3 Nahum describes the scene. Had he been a videographer you'd have seen scenes flash by, each just a second or 2 long. Each scene more horrible than the last, until you turn away because you just can't look at the "dead bodies without end". Picture a video clip of the trench warfare of World War I. As Nineveh treated the peoples it conquered, so God will treat Nineveh. The skirts in which she danced, luring men in, will be removed. Her nakedness will be seen by all. Instead of make-up she'll be plastered with mud and filth. She'll be a spectacle: how the mighty have fallen. She was a city that drew folks in. Now they shrink back from her. None mourn her loss. Good riddance to bad rubbish, one might say.

Nahum could confirm the prophecy by pointing out Nineveh's sin and God's righteous judgment. If you believe in God, in Yahweh Sabaoth, the LORD of the hosts, of the heavenly armies, then surely you understand and believe that God will not allow such evil to go on. He will be no means clear the guilty.

Now one might think, God may want to do this, but *can* He. Is not Nineveh the world's greatest city?

¹ Als de vos de passie preekt, boer, pas op je kippen.

In response the LORD points out how what looks mighty and strong on earth is nothing. Twice in their history the Assyrians themselves had done what had been thought to be impossible: capture and sack the greatest city of Egypt, Thebes, the city of the sun-God Amun.² It was well protected, as the Nile river flowed all around it, turning into a sea during the rainy season. Thebes had allies on all sides that would rush to her aid. Thebes had been far better fortified than Nineveh. Thus, for over a thousand years it had served as a power hub and religious centre for Egypt. It was hundreds of miles south of the Mediterranean, considered way out of reach for the powers of the Middle East. Yet the Assyrians had destroyed this mighty city. As we read in Nahum 3, in a most violent and horrible manner.

Now Nineveh. She might look strong to the world, God made clear it was a perception and not a reality. When the moment comes, Nineveh will be like a drunk who slides under the table, who crashed behind a pillar, and is no longer seen. Indeed, once conquered, Nineveh disappeared beneath the desert sands and it wasn't until thousands of years later that it was rediscovered. Nineveh is ripe for the picking, its soldiers are feeble and the gates that are supposed to keep enemy forces out are wide open, for the bars used to barricade them have been burned with fire.

Via Nahum God made it clear that the people should not fool themselves into thinking Nineveh was impregnable, unconquerable. Its defences will prove to be no match for the destroyer once he comes to Nineveh.

But what about Nineveh's leadership? Had her kings and princes not proven to be super powerful? Remember here that Assyria was the first nation in the world to rise to the position of world dominance, of being the only super power. Just prior to Nahum's time the threat of a split empire had been averted. Would it indeed be possible for Nineveh to be taken and Assyria to be annihilated?

Nahum sounds the warning. Nineveh can make all the preparations she wants. Get ready for a siege. Muster thousands upon thousands of troops. Even if Nineveh's soldiers were like a swarm of locusts, just like her merchants had become many, an astronomical number, more than the stars in the sky. All this people power will offer no protection. For numbering like locusts they also act like locusts. Once the food is gone, once there's no more business to be done, they merchants unfold their wings and fly away, and the soldiers with them. There's no money to be made in Nineveh, there's no point to protecting the city. Its doom is sure.

For the leadership of Nineveh has no mettle, no backbone. The bureaucracy that keeps the city going has become lethargic. The leaders, the shepherds, have fallen asleep and the people, the sheep, scatter upon the mountains. There is no unifying force, nothing that draws them together. A city built on selfishness will eventually cave in and fall.

Nahum is not describing the impossible. Nineveh's sins warrant God's judgment. Her defenses cannot withstand the assault God is planning. And her people power, the numbers of her troops and the might of her leaders, it's all a farce, a façade. Nineveh is to be destroyed.

All this judgment and violence, is it appropriate?

In response, it's interesting to note that there are two prophetic books which end with a rhetorical question. A question asked by God. They are Jonah and Nahum. Both are prophecies concerning Nineveh. Jonah ends with the question: "Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11). The answer is obvious, of course God should pity Nineveh. Another chance, for Nineveh repented. But Nineveh's time was short. Nahum's prophecy concerning Nineveh is no different from Jonah's. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4). God is a merciful God. Realizing that, the finality of

² In Hebrew it is called "No Amon", which is a transliteration of the Egyptian name for Thebes, meaning "City of the Amun".

Nahum's prophecy should instill in all the hearers – us too – a holy fear of God. God's patience has come to an end. God is true to His Name, "Yahweh, I am, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7). Nineveh had rejected God's mercy, responding with violence and pride. Thus God rejected Nineveh and let her experience what she herself dished out to other nations. We like to say: do to others as you would like others to do to you. God was doing to Nineveh what Nineveh had been doing to others, what Nineveh had been doing to God's people, what Nineveh thus had been doing to God. "For upon whom had not come the unceasing evil of Nineveh?" (Nahum 3:19b).

2) How should we now see God's judgment, God's condemnation and punishing of Nineveh? Is this a one off? Is it something limited to a certain time period of world history? What's it telling us today, God's people who live as Christians in the 21st century, thousands of years after the coming of Christ? We come to our second consideration, the downfall of God's enemies.

The downfall of Nineveh and Assyria was not a once-only event. Assyria was the first world dominant power. Thus it also became the first example of God's response to human arrogance expressed in the form of an empire. We see this clearly when we look at what happened to subsequent world-dominating empires and how God spoke of them. These things are revealed to us in the prophecy of Daniel. Daniel first served under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar liked to copy the Assyrians. Sennacherib's "Palace without Rival" is thought to have been the inspiration for Nebuchadnezzar's "Hanging Gardens of Babylon". Nebuchadnezzar was personally reprimanded by God for his pride. When he proclaimed "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" The words were barely spoken or judgment was pronounced and Nebuchadnezzar went crazy like an animal: "until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will." (Daniel 4:30 & 32b). God also had Nebuchadnezzar dream a dream in which successive world empires were depicted as a statue (Daniel 2). Looking back we can tell it refers to the empires of the Babylonians, of the Medes and Persians, of the Greeks, and finally of the Romans. A stone that came about by an act of God pulverized the statue. We tend to move on quickly to the detail that the stone then becomes a mountain to cover the whole world. But for our purposes, stop at the pulverizing. The statue of world empires was pulverized to nothing. A puff of wind blows the dust away. Untraceable. That's exactly what happened first with Nineveh, with Assyria.

The judgment, the condemnation and punishment that came upon Assyria was not unique. God applies it to all world empires that rise up against Him, that try to throw off – I'm thinking Psalm 2 now – the bonds and fetters of the Lord and do their own thing. Psalm 2 speaks of the Lord's anointed, the King appointed by God. And what does Psalm 2 say? God will make the nations His heritage and the ends of the earth His possession. He shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (Psalm 2:9). Assyria is not unique. The treatment Nineveh received reveals the pattern of God's dealings with the mighty of this earth. There's room for mercy if there is repentance, even for Nineveh, think of Jonah. But where there is a hardening in arrogance and violence, there is condemnation. Think of Nahum. Think of the pulverizing stone in Daniel. Think of the Lord's anointed wielding a rod of iron.

The stone of Daniel and the Lord's anointed of Psalm 2 is of course none other than the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, the King of kings and Lord of Lords. Which tells us, brothers and sisters, that there is no difference between the era before Christ and the era after Christ. Is the era before Christ one of violent justice and the era after Christ one of just loving mercy? No. There was mercy for Nineveh in the days of Jonah. And there was justice in the days of and after Christ.

Remembering that God condemns and punishes those who spurn His love, think of God's own covenant people. The Jews figured that they, as God's people, were beyond destruction. But no. During His ministry the Lord Jesus exposed the religion of the Jews to be hypocrisy. The leaders of the people were whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside, rotten on the inside. They were hypocrites, converting people to a worship of God that made them children of hell. When the Jews murdered the Messiah sent by God, God had mercy. He did not immediately destroy His people. It was going to happen. Peter quotes Psalm 110 on Pentecost: "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." The Jews who heard this would have memorized the whole Psalm. They also knew it said this: "The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth." The Jews realized they were staring condemnation in the face. That's why they were cut to heart. That's why Peter also says to them: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." (Acts 2) For roughly 40 years later, in 70 AD, the Romans came and took Jerusalem, destroying it as once the Babylonians had destroyed Nineveh. The Lord Jesus spoke of this event as a fulfillment of a prophecy of Daniel (Matthew 24).

God's vengeance follows a pattern, a pattern of fairness that has room for mercy but is not spineless love. This remains true for our day and age as well. It's true for the human empires of our time. Powers such as the USA, Russia, and China should take warning from a prophecy like that of Nahum. And most of all, it's true for the all-encompassing battle of this world, the enmity between Satan and Christ, between the descendants of the serpent and the descendants of the woman. Let's read about this from the Bible book Revelation. Realize that Revelation is prophecy, just as Nahum is prophecy. It is prophecy for the era after Pentecost, prophecy from none other than our greatest prophet and teacher, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's turn to some of its last chapters and read of the downfall of God's enemies.

Revelation 18:1-8, 19:1-3, 11-21

God confirms the certainty of the enemy's downfall.

The prophecy of Nahum proclaims God's justice for all times and places. God is love, let there be no doubt about that. God was merciful to Nineveh at a time when just 40 days separated Nineveh from annihilation. But when in the course of time Nineveh rejected God's love, God's love expressed itself in divine justice. A justice which is totally fair: for it was done to Nineveh as Nineveh had done to others. God is jealous in His love and for the sake of His love: though He forgives He will by no means clear the guilty.

Today is the first day of Advent. The first day of four weeks of looking forward to the Coming, the Coming of the Christ. Realize, beloved of God, that we aren't looking forward to the first coming of the Christ. The first coming, which would bring salvation for the whole world. The first coming, which was in a sense like Jonah prophesying in Nineveh. We look forward to the last coming. The coming of the Christ in judgment and glory. More like Nahum prophesying of Nineveh. For the next coming is the final coming. It will bring the Final Judgment. Jesus Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. A judgment that displays both mercy and justice, that expresses God's love and vengeance. For that's when He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, and take me and all His chosen ones into heavenly joy and glory (Lord's Day 19). May the Day of Christ come soon. Maranatha.

Amen