

## **WHO CAN WITHSTAND HIM? A SHORT STUDY OF THE BOOK OF NAHUM**

### **Notes For Part One: Background, Overview & Themes**

*The prophet Nahum wrote roughly a century after Micah, yet these two books are connected, as they discuss different aspects of the same situation. When Micah prophesied that God would use Assyria to discipline his people, he left unanswered the question of how a righteous God could use a nation as vile and sinful as Assyria. Nahum addresses that and some related questions.*

#### ***Background to Nahum***

Although little is known with certainty about the prophet Nahum\* aside from his book of prophecy, the historical background to Nahum can be easily established. His prophecies were made in the middle of the 7th century BC, sometime between 663 BC and 612 BC\*\*. In this era, the Assyrian Empire experienced great success, but also began to face a crisis in its relations with Babylon. While this was going on, God had some important messages for his own people.

\* In Hebrew, Nahum roughly means "comfort". Nehemiah is a more common form of the same name.

\*\* In 663 BC, the Assyrians destroyed the Egyptian city of Thebes, an event referred to as past in Nahum 3:8-10 (see also below). The city of Nineveh fell to Babylon in 612 BC.

The events and teachings in Micah form much of the background to Nahum. As we detailed when studying Micah, when Micah began preaching in about 750 BC, the people of God were divided into two kingdoms: a Northern Kingdom called Samaria, after its capital city, or sometimes just called Israel, and a Southern Kingdom called Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.

In Micah's lifetime, the Assyrian Empire began a series of campaigns in the region. God allowed the Assyrians to conquer the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, and the ten tribes of that kingdom were dispersed. The Assyrians pressured Judah, and for some years exacted tribute from her. But in the reign of King Hezekiah, Judah decided to resist the Assyrians, which eventually led to the tumultuous siege of 701 BC, which ended with God miraculously delivering his people.

As we have seen, Micah prophesied this siege, and he also foresaw further attacks by Assyria, while assuring God's people that they would survive. But Micah, like Isaiah, proclaimed that Babylon would later rise, and that the Babylonians would take Judah captive for a time, with Judah's restoration following afterwards. Micah did not dwell on the ultimate fate of Assyria itself, nor did he discuss the implications of God's use of the Assyrians in his plans.

Nahum's own era, the 600s BC, saw the Assyrians' final successes. They invaded Egypt, and in 663 BC captured, tormented, and destroyed the great ancient Egyptian city of Thebes\* (or Luxor), just across the Nile River from the "Valley of the Kings", the great burial site of ancient Egyptian royalty. Meanwhile, the Babylonian Empire\*\* was expanding and preparing to challenge Assyria. The Babylonians conquered Assyria's capital city of Nineveh in 612 BC, and then defeated the remnant of the Assyrian Army and their allies at Carchemish in 605 BC.

\* There was also a city of Thebes in ancient Greece, which was named after the Egyptian city. The Greek city of Thebes is well-known in classical mythology as the home of Oedipus and his daughter Antigone.

\*\* Often called by historians the Neo-Babylonian Empire, to distinguish it from the much earlier Babylonian Empire best known for the law code promulgated by Hammurabi, its most famous ruler.

Assyria had a long history of its own, which we won't be able to cover here, and it often appears as part of the Old Testament history of God's people. The Assyrians first appear in Jonah's mission to their capital Nineveh, which at the time led to a large-scale repentance. Later, however, the Assyrians became a constant threat to Israel and Judah, and they are frequently mentioned in Kings, Chronicles, and the prophetic books. The Assyrian conquest of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC was soon followed by attacks on Judah and Jerusalem, from which only God's own hand was able to protect his people. Besides Nahum, Isaiah and Zephaniah also prophesied the final fall of Assyria (see Isaiah 10:5-19 and Zephaniah 2:13-15).

Questions For Discussion or Study: What significance could events in Nahum's lifetime have for interpreting his book of prophecy? What general lessons can we find in the ways that Assyrian history relates to biblical history? Are there any lessons that we can apply to our own lives and ministries? What implications are there in the fact that God used pagan nations like Assyria and Babylon to accomplish his work?

### ***Overview of Nahum***

Nahum is filled with vivid language and imagery that the prophet uses to emphasize his points. The book can be outlined by looking at the main thrust in each of its three chapters, and in doing so the key themes of the book also become apparent. Although God himself used Assyria to discipline his people, Assyria will be destroyed and God's people will one day be restored.

In the first chapter of Nahum, the prophet discusses God's character and also the ways that God views Jerusalem and Nineveh. Nahum is certainly aware of the reasons why God has used the Assyrians to discipline his own people, but he also knows that there are some important differences between the sins of God's people, which are correctible, and the hard hearts of the Assyrians, which make them usable only as what Isaiah refers to as "the rod of my (i.e. God's) anger" (Isaiah 10:5). Nahum in part answers the question of how God could allow a nation of unbelievers to discipline his own people\*, no matter how sinful they had been.

\* The book of Habakkuk was written for a similar purpose. Not long after Nahum, the prophet Habakkuk asked God when he was going to deal with the sins his people were committing. God answered that soon the Babylonians would come to render discipline to Judah (which began with their invasion of 606 BC, and culminated in the conquest of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon in 586 BC). On hearing this, Habakkuk asked the question of how God could possibly allow a pagan nation to harm his own people, and then listened as God explained his plans and his perspective to the prophet.

The book\* of Nahum opens with a series of images that illustrate God's awe-inspiring nature and character (1:1-8). Nahum does not simply say that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but gives vivid symbols to illustrate his power in striking and memorable ways. In particular, Nahum says that God stands ready to use his power to punish and discipline when it is necessary, but that at the same time he can be a wonderful place of refuge for those who trust in him. Note that the imagery in verses 3-6 is similar to that in Micah and other prophetic books.

\* Although it has little influence on the interpretation of Nahum's prophecies, it is somewhat interesting that Nahum is the only one of the prophets who actually calls his book a "book". This probably means that he was inspired to write an actual book from the beginning, whereas many of the other prophets probably first gave inspired oral lessons, which they (or supporters) then collected into a written record.

God's own character determines the actions he will take towards Nineveh (i.e. Assyria) and Judah. He will render judgment upon Nineveh, but will provide peace and restoration for Judah

(1:9-15). The Assyrians were useful to him, but they were useful in spite of themselves. All the while that God allowed them to be successful, they took the credit and glory for themselves. Even as God used them, they were plotting evil against him (verse 11). But for Judah there would be good news (verse 15). After a time of discipline, they would again worship and serve God with a renewed spirit. Despite their sin, someplace deep inside themselves they still desired to belong to their God.

In the second chapter of Nahum, the prophet proclaims the coming doom of Nineveh and Assyria. He foresees that the wicked attacker will itself be attacked and crushed, while formerly oppressed Judah will regain its splendor (2:1-4). In verses 3-4, the prophet describes the coming assault of the Babylonians, who even now are being raised up as God's new weapon against those who are disobedient to him.

Nineveh will put up a futile defense against this attack (2:5-13). They will try everything they know how to do, but it will not stave off defeat. The references to flooding and pools of water in verses 6-8 are particularly interesting in view of some of the historical details of Nineveh's fall. The ancient historian Diodorus Siculus, for example, relates that a series of heavy rains began to swell the Tigris River, making it easy for the invaders to turn the city's own sluice gates against it, flooding a stretch of the city wall and significantly assisting in the attack.

It is also interesting to note that Nahum does not merely proclaim Nineveh's doom and destruction, but that he takes all of chapter three to emphasize the shame that will accompany the city's collapse. So much of Assyria's earthly power, as is the case with so many worldly oppressors and bullies, came from pride, and the prophet wants God's people to see the Assyrians revealed for what they are. First, he foresees their defeat (3:1-4) in a terse succession of images that starkly contrasts their evil glory with the total defeat they shall soon experience.

Then Nahum dwells at length on Nineveh's humiliation (3:5-19). The more prideful someone is (whether a believer or an unbeliever), the more humiliating it will be for that person when God disciplines him or her. Nineveh had extraordinary pride, and thus their humiliation will be total. Some of the images in these verses are unforgettable descriptions of God's desire to humble them completely. Nahum even taunts them with one of their own worldly triumphs, their victory over Thebes (verses 8-10), after which the Assyrians had gone out of their way to inflict unnecessary suffering and destruction on the losers and their city. When Nineveh is the recipient of this kind of humbling, no one will care or show them mercy (verse 19).

Questions For Discussion or Study: What seem to be the prophet's main points of emphasis? What lessons would we expect to learn from studying Nahum? What reasons might there be for God emphasizing these particular things in a prophecy made against Assyria? How do the positive things that Nahum says to God's people fit in?

### ***Significant Themes in Nahum***

There are a couple of themes that are particularly important in the book. First, Nahum wants both God's people and unbelievers to see and acknowledge God's power and God's control over all things. He also wants his readers to understand how God chooses to use his power. God's omnipotence is a source of danger to the ungodly, but a source of security and hope to believers.

First of all, Nahum emphasizes, as do most of the prophetic books, some important aspects of God's nature. At the very beginning of the book (1:2), the prophet reminds us that God is a

"jealous" God. This is a side of God that we do not often consider carefully, but it is important to remember that he does feel a particular interest in his people, and he will not welcome any attempt by worldly forces to claim ownership or influence over them.

God is also slow to anger, yet great in power (verse 3). We should never allow God's patience to make us forget his power, nor should we allow his power to make us forget his patience. Both are essential in understanding who he is. Nahum follows this verse with vivid images to remind us that God's power is greater than storms, seas, mountains, or any of the earth's greatest forces.

One of Nahum's goals is also to help us to understand some things about the ways that God chooses to use his power in this world. To the ungodly, God's power should be a severe warning. Twice he explicitly tells Nineveh, "I am against you" (2:13 and 3:5). The ungodly are all too often complacent, and thus God occasionally gives them a very small demonstration of his power, hoping that some of them will heed it and repent.

But for those who trust in God, God's power makes him a secure and longed-for refuge, as Nahum says in 1:7, perhaps the best-known verse from the book. The very power that means danger for the worldly becomes a promise of peace and restoration for believers who are suffering, discouraged, or persecuted in this world. We know first of all that God has absolute power over the affairs of this world. He can act any time that it is within his will, and if he does not act, we also know that he has a greater purpose in mind. More than that, we know that no matter what this world denies to us or does to us, we have an eternal home with a glory that will transcend anything even imagined in this world.

There are a number of applications for Christians in the book of Nahum. It can particularly help us to look for spiritual parallels. The struggle between God's people and worldly nations such as Assyria, Babylon, and the like often forms a parallel with our own experience in struggling against the worldly powers we ourselves must face. Things that played out in physical form in the Old Testament era so often find fulfillment on a spiritual level in the lives of Christians. When we conclude this short study next week, we shall consider a few of these possibilities.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How do these key themes fit in with the subject matter concerning Nineveh and the Assyrians? What themes does Nahum have in common with Micah, and/or with other prophetic books with which you are familiar? What spiritual parallels to Nahum's message might be especially helpful to us?

### ***Sources & References for Nahum***

As is the case with Micah, commentaries on the short book of Nahum are most usually parts of commentaries on two or more prophetic books. Here are a few of the more useful sources for studying Nahum. Let me know if you would like suggestions for your own study:

Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi* (Interpretation Commentary)  
David Baker, *Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)  
Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books (Micah & Nahum)* (Welwyn Commentary Series)  
Alberto Ferreira (editor), *The Twelve Prophets* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)  
Frank E. Gaebelein (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 7*  
O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah* (NICOT)

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## WHO CAN WITHSTAND HIM? A SHORT STUDY OF THE BOOK OF NAHUM

### Notes For Part Two: Nahum's Message to Christians

Last week, we looked at the background to the book of Nahum, and then surveyed the contents and the most significant themes of the book. Nahum's prophecies foretold the fall of the Assyrian Empire, which had been a menace to God's people for many years. This week, we shall look at some parallels that show how Nahum's message can be helpful to Christians today.

#### **Review**

Nahum was written roughly a century after the book of Micah. In Nahum's time, Assyria had been a long-standing threat to God's people. In the first chapter, the prophet describes God's nature, slow to anger yet great in power, and he explains how this will be shown in his treatment of Jerusalem and Nineveh. Nineveh's doom is now near (chapter two), while for the Israelites God will bring refuge and hope. Not only will Nineveh and the Assyrians be destroyed, but they will also be covered with shame (chapter three) for all the world to see.

The book of Nahum emphasizes the ways in which God's nature determines the things that he does. His patience allows us all to have a chance to come to know him, but his power is great, and nothing on earth can withstand it. Much of Nahum's prophecy has to do with the ways in which God chooses to use his power in this world.

#### **God's Character & His Will in Nahum**

In the first chapter, the prophet first gives us some vivid images of God's awe-inspiring nature and character. He then reveals what God has decided concerning Assyria and Judah. It is significant to note how the prophet demonstrates the ways that God's own nature determines his plans and his will. He does nothing on a whim, but always acts in ways that are true to himself.

The first few verses in Nahum (1:1-8) can be very helpful in appreciating God's power. God has absolute sovereignty over nature and over all of the affairs of humanity. That should not be a surprise, since he made everything himself. Yet we so often allow worldly powers or worldly events to cloud our minds, so that we doubt God's power. No one can withstand God's power, and nothing can endure God's power.

In order to have confidence in God's will, we must first understand his nature. When the prophet tells us that God is slow to anger, but great in power, he is identifying two very important aspects of God's nature. A healthy view of God will take into account his patience and love, but also his power and his righteousness. Just as God allowed his people to be oppressed by the Assyrians, he sometimes allows those whom he loves to suffer, if there is a greater spiritual purpose that can thus be fulfilled. And he frequently postpones the punishment of the wicked, if there is still a hope of their repentance. Unless we accept that God has higher priorities than our short-term happiness, we will often be filled with doubts and confusion.

God's judgment on Nineveh (1:8-14) is an inevitable consequence of his righteous nature. Nineveh was a vile and sin-filled place, and they had finally exhausted even God's great patience. He regretfully had to punish them, knowing that their hearts had become too hard for

another repentance (such as he had once granted them through Jonah). God never allows the guilty to go unpunished, but this does not mean that God is fussy or arbitrary. Rather, it is part of who he is that he cannot have fellowship with sin. Yet, he often defers punishment for a long time (in our terms), because of his patience and love. This too is part of who he is.

To his own people who trust in him, God brings refuge and good news (1:7, 1:15). We need a refuge from the harshness of the world just as much as the ancient Israelites needed it. We have many stresses and fears in our lives, and worldly forms of refuge do not give us the lasting comfort and security that our souls need. God's refuge and mercy are never contingent on our performance or our knowledge, but rather on our trust in him. If we trust him, and place our faith in him rather than in this world, we can know that he is there for us.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How can we see God's power in our daily lives? What can we do to see it more clearly? Of what significance to us is God's inability to let sin go unpunished? From what things do we need refuge? What kind of refuge does the world seek? What kind of refuge does God provide? How can we benefit from it?

### *Nineveh* is certain *a* *Nahum*

In proclaiming that Nineveh would fall regardless of the efforts the Assyrians made in its defense, God was also assuring his own people that their greatest source of worry and fear was completely under his control. In the same way, we ought to remind ourselves each day that the things that trouble, harm, and frighten us are always under God's control. As surely as God himself lives, he is greater and more powerful than anything in our world.

God uses Nahum to proclaim that Nineveh is doomed beyond any doubt (2:1-4). There was probably a lapse of some time before Nineveh's final fall occurred, but from the moment that the prophet proclaimed it, this judgment was certain. When Nahum wrote his book, Assyria had been a constant threat to God's people for a century or more. Nahum's original readers and hearers would thus have lived their entire lives in fear of Assyria and of the harm that it could cause. While we do not at present face the same kind of long-term threat (though those living in some other countries do), we still have our own Assyrians, things we have feared all of our lives, things that have harmed us all of our lives. If we realize that God swept away a great kingdom like Assyria, we can also realize that God has power over any problem in our own lives.

The prophet proclaims that, despite its imposing appearance to the world, Nineveh is in fact defenseless against the coming attack (2:5-13). Some of their own strengths will even be turned against them\*, and will become weaknesses when it matters most. Nahum's vision is a powerful lesson in appearance and reality. Worldly bullies always do their best to appear intimidating, so as to hide their weaknesses. Not only are worldly forces often not as strong as they appear to be in worldly terms, but also, even the worldly power they do have is insignificant in eternity. Jesus said to fear not those who can destroy the body, but to fear only him who can destroy the soul\*\*.

\* See, for example, the notes from last week about Nahum's images in 2:6-8.

\*\* See Matthew 10:26-31 and Luke 12:4-7. Those passages would make good comparison studies.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What things are constant sources of fear, worry, or harm in our lives? What power does God have over them? How can we take courage from what God did to Nineveh? How can we entrust these things to God?

## *Nineveh* ☐ *Shame* ☐ *Nahum* ☐☐

Nahum does not stop at proclaiming the doom of Nineveh. He also describes in great detail the humiliation and shame that will accompany its fall. In fact, the Assyrians have already covered themselves with shame by their cruelty, violence, and other sins. In shaming them before the world, God will simply make clear to all their true nature, which has always been clear to him.

The graphic, rapid-fire imagery of Nahum 3:1-4 is meant to preview the sudden reversal that will befall the Assyrians. Their power will turn to weakness, the great city of Nineveh will become a ruin, and the things they did to others will be done to them. Nahum says that this is "all because of the wanton lust of a harlot", that is, because of their unrestrained fleshly desires.

It is one of the basic aspects of living as Christians that we are called to "escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4). The worldly, instead, glorify and worship their desires. Because they know in their hearts that this is wrong, they must come up with all kinds of rationalizations for their selfish lusts and cravings, and they call these uncontrolled appetites "sophisticated" or "hip". Behavior and language that is actually typical of adolescents they call "adult". But nothing can erase the spiritual shame of living to please the flesh instead of living to satisfy the spirit. "Their glory is in their shame" (Philippians 3:19).

In bringing shame and destruction upon Nineveh, God is simply revealing her for what she is (3:5-19). Nahum's imagery of helplessness, filth, and contempt would soon be fulfilled literally when the Babylonians demolished and ransacked Nineveh, but they were already true of the Assyrians' spiritual condition. So too, we must remember that the worldly unbelievers who tempt us, taunt us, and sometimes torment us are themselves living behind a façade that will someday be torn away. The apparent glamour and "excitement" of sin is a thin cover for its true shameful and destructive nature.

Nineveh's sins are no different, in essence, from the temptations the world offers to us. The world tries to get us to sin by presenting selfish desires as something important, by re-labeling shameful things with sanitized but deceitful labels, and by telling us that we are "missing out" on some fun and exciting things. This can be very persuasive, especially at times when we may feel discouraged or lonely. Christians do indeed sacrifice a lot of worldly opportunities to gratify their flesh's urges. But the spiritual rewards that we shall gain will not even compare with the pitiful little thrills that we have to pass up. And if we live godly lives, we also shall never have to wallow in shame and humiliation when God once and for all reveals everything for what it is.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does the prophet emphasize the shame that will come upon the Assyrians, and not just their destruction? What parallels for today are there in this? In what ways does the world try to hide the true nature of the sins that it commits? How can we learn to see sin for what it really is? What positive things can replace the sins that we find tempting (or the sins that we used to commit)?

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