

Nahum

Background

- Nahum prophesied in the late 7th century during the reign of King Josiah.
- The northern kingdom had already fallen to Assyria but the southern kingdom was still standing. Assyria had destroyed Samaria in 722-721 B.C. and took the people of Israel into captivity.
- Assyria was a threat to Judah during the time when Nahum was prophesying.

Outline

- Even though Nahum's name means compassion/comfort, the content of his message was largely one of judgment – a stern sentence against Assyria (represented by Nineveh).
- The book is a “war oracle” or oracle against a foreign nation in which God threatens judgment on Israel's enemies. Some of Nahum's words concerned Judah but most of the message was addressed either to Nineveh or its king.

Assyria

- At the time of Nahum's prophecy the Assyrians were at the height of their power. It had been at least 125 years since Jonah had announced Nineveh's destruction causing city-wide reform. The people's response to Jonah's message delayed Nineveh's destruction (Jonah 3:10).
- Their repentance was short-lived and they returned to their old violent ways – extreme wickedness, cruelty, and pride (the Assyrians invented crucifixion).
 - They massacred their victims, beheading, impaling, or burning them.
 - The leaders of defeated nations were tortured and mutilated before being executed.
 - They committed infanticide on the babies of nations they conquered (3:10).
- They are described as the city of blood, full of lies and plunder, and never without victims (3:1). Their cruelty was so far-reaching that after their destruction everyone who would hear about it would rejoice (3:19).
- The Assyrians were prosperous because they used their military might to prey on and loot other nations.
- They were idol worshippers (1:14) and participated in witchcraft and sorcery (3:4).
- The people of Assyria were numerous; their merchants are described as being more than the stars of the sky (3:16). [*This was no longer a term of blessing for the people of Israel but was instead used for Israel's enemies.*] Nineveh's many people, rather than being an asset, would be a liability on the day of judgment because they would take from the land and flee on the day of trouble (3:16-17, see also 2:8).
- Jonah is the other book that ends with a rhetorical question. The concluding question posed in Jonah asks why God's shouldn't show the people of Nineveh mercy whereas the one in Nahum almost implies the question of why He shouldn't destroy them.

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city? (Jonah 4:11)

Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty? (Nahum 3:19)

Nineveh's Judge (1:1-15)

- The book of Nahum begins with God declaring that His jealousy and vengeance have been provoked and that He is filled with wrath for His enemies (1:2).
 - God's wrath is directed at the guilty (1:3) – There is certainty of punishment for the guilty.
 - God is slow to anger (1:3) – This is mentioned in between verses about His great power and wrath.
 - God is good (1:7) – His anger isn't aroused on a whim but when it is, it will be for a just cause.
- Half of the first chapter is spent establishing the person and character of God.
- There is an emphasis on the severity of God's wrath and His greatness in creation (1:3-6).

-In contrast with His indignation directed at Nineveh, God promises that His punishment on Judah will end (1:12); no such promise is made to Assyria. Instead, Assyria will be completely cut off and will pass away (1:14-15).

Nineveh's Judgment (2:1-13)

-God declares twice that He is against the Assyrians (2:13, see also 3:5).

-There will be widespread judgment on Nineveh, from those in the highest positions to the lowest: nobles, shepherds, and slave girls (2:6-7, see also 3:18).

-Nahum's prophecy included visions of the destruction and loss that Nineveh would face on the day of God's judgment (2:3-10, see also 3:2-3).

-The city will be plundered and the events of that day will demoralize and terrify the people (2:9-10).

Nineveh's Total Destruction (3:1-19)

-God decreed that Nineveh's destruction would be complete and irreversible (3:19).

-There will be massive casualties (3:3) and God will scatter the survivors of Assyria with no one to gather them (3:18). (Contrast this with God's promise in Isaiah to gather His scattered people).

-Fire will consume both the people and their defenses (3:13, 15).

-Not only will Assyria be totally destroyed but their name and their glory will be ruined as well (3:5-7).

Themes

God as Judge of the Nations

-God's character (E.g., jealous, patient, just, righteous) and His wrath are revealed early in the book of Nahum.

-Nahum highlights God's might over nature and creation, how He works through them and subdues them.

God's sovereignty also extends to His control over the destinies of nations, both for Israel as well as foreign nations.

-God makes a comparison of Nineveh in its former glory with what they will be when they face His judgment (2:11-13). They were fierce, they were well fed and went about not afraid of anything, they were prosperous and had military might but all of that will cease to be.

-Their fortresses and strongholds will fall (3:12) – Man's might is useless against God.

-They will be defenseless (3:13), their warriors will be no more effective against their invaders than the civilian women (physically weaker, untrained, inexperienced in war, unable to defend).

-God's decree of judgment contrasts His own righteousness and His just and triumphant kingdom with earthly kingdoms that are built on wickedness and tyranny and that are destined to fall.

Nineveh's Destruction

-Assyria's wound will be fatal; they will never recover from the blow that they will be dealt (1:15; 3:19).

-They will be exposed to public disgrace (3:5-7).

-Having seen a vision of Nineveh's destruction, Nahum taunts them comparing Nineveh with fallen Thebes whom the Assyrians defeated in 663 B.C. (3:8-10).

-The judgment against Nineveh was fulfilled in 612 B.C. when Nineveh was destroyed by the Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians who laid siege to the city.

God as a Refuge for His People

-The Lord is good and a refuge, caring for those who trust in Him (1:7).

-Nahum contains allusions to past mighty acts of God on behalf of His people (1:4). This connection to the past is a call to remember how God has been faithful and His mightiness to save.

-Rebuking the sea to dry it up – the exodus (Exodus 14:15-31; Psalm 106:9).

-Making rivers run dry – crossing into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:13-16).

- Assyria had defeated Samaria and the northern kingdom in 722-721 B.C. but God declared that “trouble will not come a second time” (1:9). God protected Judah from the Assyrians so that they were not able to set foot in Judah.
- God promised Judah that the affliction that they had faced at His hands would end (1:12) and that they would be freed from the yoke that they were under (1:13) – Judah was Assyria’s vassal.
- God also promised restoration of the splendor of Jacob (2:2) and recovery from the desolation that they had experienced.
- Amidst the proclamation of woe to Nineveh there was a message of peace for Judah and a call to celebrate and to be faithful; their enemy would be no more (1:15).

Conclusion

- There was no need for Judah to fear because God is jealous and still protected His people by decisively destroying their enemies. God doesn’t leave or forsake His people and those who harm them arouse His anger. In the end, God will return to judge and to vindicate.
- Nahum’s message lives up to his name because his prophecy against Assyria and accompanying message of salvation and restoration for a remnant of Israel would be a comfort for the faithful in Judah.
- The destruction of Judah’s enemy was an act of compassion toward Judah. It would also be a blessing to other nations as well so great was the extent of Assyria’s wickedness.
- Trust in God rather than the world because the God who sets the course of nations is mighty to save.

Habakkuk

Background

- Little is known about Habakkuk. He prophesied not long after Nahum and was probably a contemporary of his as well as of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and possibly Joel. He lived during the late 7th or early 6th century B.C., either during the end of Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.) or at the beginning of Jehoiakim's (609-598 B.C.).
- Babylon was the ruling nation at the time when Habakkuk was prophesying.
- Habakkuk's prophecy mainly addressed the internal problems of Judah. Judah was in steep ethical decline, the people were violent and lawless and Habakkuk called out to God for justice. However, the answer he received from God wasn't what he expected (similar to Job).

Outline

- Habakkuk includes no oracle to Israel but instead consists mainly of a dialogue between the prophet and God. The message concerns the coming Babylonian invasion that God was "raising up" (1:6).
- Though it was a conversation, the book was written for Israel. In it God speaks also to those who, like Habakkuk, were troubled over the state of the nation.
- Habakkuk expresses his frustration and perplexity over God's lack of response to the rampant wickedness, injustice, and violence in Judah in the form of laments (1:2-4).

Habakkuk's First Complaint: Why does evil in Judah go unpunished? (1:1-4)

- Habakkuk complained to God of Judah's corruption. Injustice and conflict abounded and God seemed to tolerate it (1:3). The wicked were oppressing the righteous (1:4). Beyond escaping punishment, Habakkuk questioned why the wicked were prospering at the expense of the righteous.
- During this time God was silent to Habakkuk's calls for help (1:2).

What response was Habakkuk expecting from God? Salvation for the righteous, God's direct intervention.

God's Reply: The Babylonians will punish Judah (1:5-11)

- God didn't answer Habakkuk's question. Instead he declared that He would judge Judah through another wicked nation, Babylon. He was raising up the Babylonians (a fierce and ruthless people) to bring death and destruction to Judah.

What is the problem with this? God was giving success to a nation that was even more wicked. He would be blessing a foreign nation over and against His own people. Giving Babylon victory would cause them to disdain the God of Israel even more (E.g., Sennacherib's field commander – Isaiah 36:14-20) and solidify them in the worship of their own gods because of their success (1:16).

Babylon

- Babylon was a wicked and arrogant nation (2:4-5).
 - They were a law to themselves, promoting their own honour (1:7).
 - Their hope was in their own strength (1:11).
- They were powerful and the people were able to do what they wanted, showing no fear or respect for other rulers and nations (1:10). Men were helpless against them (1:14-15).
- They were bent on violence and swept up their victims like the desert wind sweeps up the sand (1:9). They were ruthless in their destruction of other nations (1:17). They would lay waste cities and do violence to all of the inhabitants, both men and animals (2:17).
- They were idol worshippers (1:16; 2:18-19).
- They were materialistic and their greed was insatiable (2:5-7).
- They acted through crime and bloodshed and put their trust in their own achievements to become a lasting kingdom (2:9, 12).
- Five woes are pronounced on Babylon for their wickedness in God's answer to Habakkuk's second complaint.

Habakkuk's Second Complaint: How could a just God use Babylon to execute justice? (1:12-2:1)

-Habakkuk acknowledged that God would use Babylon as His instrument of judgment and upheld His character (everlasting, holy, pure – 1:12-13) but questioned why He would allow the treacherous to live and not intervene when they consumed those who were more righteous (1:13).

-God's justice didn't match Nahum's sense of what justice should be. We don't have the mind of God; we can't sit in judgment on His ways.

-Habakkuk's comparison between the "righteousness" of Babylon and Judah reveals an underlying attitude.

-It is a relative comparison between Judah and Babylon. In reality, both nations deserved punishment.

-Habakkuk's statement that God's eyes are too pure to look on evil also applies to Judah.

-Likewise, we shouldn't make relative comparisons. We must use God's standards rather than man's.

-Habakkuk resolved to wait for the Lord's response (2:1) – seeking an answer like Job.

God's Reply: Babylon will be punished and faith will be rewarded (2:2-20)

-God announced a certain end for Babylon, a time had already been appointed for it (2:3). God assured Habakkuk that He would judge Babylon and send destruction on them. There is a repeated theme of Babylon being paid back in kind for what they've done to others (2:6-8, 16).

-God pronounced five woes on Babylon for what they had done:

2:6 – Greed, extortion (violence & theft).

2:9 – National expansion through unjust gain, trust in self, pride and presumption.

2:12 – Establishment of cities and towns through bloodshed and crime.

2:15 – Exploitation of neighbours.

2:19 – Idolatry.

-God contrasts the puffed up unrighteous Babylonians with those who are righteous. The difference is that the righteous will live by faith (in God).

-God declared that Babylon would ultimately be subject to taunting and scorn by those they once oppressed (2:6-7). He will undo all of their efforts to subdue nations and to build a lasting kingdom for themselves.

Those under them will rise up and strike them with fear, those things they built for themselves and put their hope in will be destined for destruction (2:13). God will bring shame and disgrace on them for glorifying themselves (2:16).

-God's purpose is to fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory (2:14; see also Isaiah 11:9). The worldly glory of Babylon and the greatness of its name would ultimately serve to increase God's glory when He finally destroyed it.

-God concludes by contrasting Himself to the idols of the Babylonians. As opposed to the mute, lifeless idols that were made by men, God is in His holy temple (judging and rightly receiving worship).

Habakkuk's Prayer: Confession of trust and joy in God (3:1-19)

-Habakkuk's response is a prayer to God in which he recounts God's past mighty acts on behalf of Israel:

-Plagues on Egypt (3:5)

-Plague on the Nile, the crossing of the Jordan and the Red Sea (3:8)

-The long day of Joshua (3:11; see also Joshua 10:13)

-Defeat of Pharaoh and the plundering of Egypt (3:13-15)

-Habakkuk stood in awe of God's deeds (response to 2:20), asking Him to remember mercy in His wrath (3:2). He extolled God's glory and splendour and His greatness in all of creation (3:6-11).

-Amidst the mighty and fearsome acts of God, He was working out deliverance for His people (3:13).

-He affirmed that he would wait patiently (3:16) for God's day of judgment (response to 2:3). Even in the face of dire outward circumstances he would rejoice in the Lord and have joy in God his Saviour (3:17-18).

Themes

God's Sovereignty

- God is sovereign over all of creation; the earth, mountains, hills, rivers, streams, the sea, celestial bodies, and the forces of nature all respond and submit to Him (3:6-11).
- He is Lord over the nations, raising them up (1:6) and deposing them (3:12-13) at will.
- He is sovereign even over the actions of the wicked, they serve His purposes. He Himself is not touched by evil but in holiness He controls everything.
- In His sovereignty, He also strengthens those who put their faith in Him and gives them sure-footed confidence (3:19).

The Righteous Will Live by Faith (2:4; see also Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38)

- “Let all the earth be silent...” (2:3, 20). God calls on the earth to live by faith and in reverent trust in Him (like Job's response; see also Zephaniah 1:7). He is trustworthy and all that He promises will come to pass.
- Habakkuk's response to God was one of faith (3:16), he praised God for His salvation and waited patiently for His justice. Even as God made His pronouncement of the impending Babylonian invasion Habakkuk didn't fear that it would be the end of all of God's people (1:12).
- His faith allowed him to trust God in the absence of a full understanding of God's ways and to rejoice in the midst of bleak circumstances (3:16-19).

What is the connection between faith and righteousness?

- Those who have no assurance in a perfectly good and loving God act ruthlessly or in self-interest to fulfill their desires because they only have themselves to depend on.
- They don't have God's moral standards so their desires are wicked or they pursue them without restraint.
- They don't answer to a God who is supremely powerful and unswervingly just so they become proud.

How does our faith affect the way we live?

Conclusion

- Babylon believed that they were at the top, just as Assyria before them had believed, but at the height of their pride they would be shown that they were answerable to a greater authority. Their victory over Judah was only given to them by God to fulfill His purposes.
- Like with Job, God didn't explain His actions to Habakkuk's full satisfaction or even answer the question that he posed. Instead, He revealed enough of His character that the prophet could trust Him.
- Habakkuk was vexed by God's ways, which seemed unfathomable or unjust, but was finally led to make a confession of faith in Him. We must also seek to live in faithful confidence in God. He rules over all and will ultimately vindicate His people despite all circumstances that appear to the contrary.

Zephaniah

Background

- Zephaniah prophesied a few years before Habakkuk, during the early reign of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.) before his reform took place (the majority of it happened before 621 B.C.).
- He was a contemporary of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah and probably grew up in the midst of the Assyrian oppression, during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon, when Israel was led into apostasy.
- He was evidently a man of considerable social standing (probably related to the royal line through Hezekiah – 715-686 B.C.). The book begins by tracing the author’s ancestry (1:1), which is unusual for Hebrew prophets. Aside from the fact that he was a fourth-generation descendant of Hezekiah, nothing else is said about him.

Outline

- Zephaniah is a book that deals with the judgment of the world, including the fall of Judah to Babylon.
- During Zephaniah’s time Judah was practicing idolatry. God’s patience with Judah had reached its end and Zephaniah was sent to announce God’s approaching judgment.
- Though judgment would fall first on Judah, the destruction spoken of in Zephaniah would be global (1:2-3). Everything on the face of the earth will be swept away. This is reminiscent of the flood-level destruction of Noah’s day. Judgment would be on all life on earth (1:2).

So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens...” (Genesis 6:7)

“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD. “I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea...” (Zephaniah 1:2-3)

- Zephaniah alternates between first-person divine speeches and third-person speeches from the prophet. It also focuses on the coming of the “day of the Lord” (1:7).
- The book begins with oracles regarding to Judah’s immanent situation, moves on to oracles against foreign nations, and concludes with oracles of future eschatological blessing (similar in structure to Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah).

The Day of the Lord Comes on Judah and the Nations (1:1-18)

- God declares that judgment will come first against Judah and all who live in Jerusalem because of their pagan religions, their worship of Baal, the starry hosts, and Molech (1:4-6). He will also punish those who are complacent, who rested securely and paid no regard to God (1:12).
- Punishment will come to those who have conformed to the practices and religions of the nations around them (1:8-9).
- There will be wailing and great distress in Jerusalem on the day of the Lord (1:10-11). Jerusalem’s wealth will be plundered and its houses demolished. The people will be put to labour to build and to plant for the benefit of others (1:13).
- The day of the Lord will be dark and terrifying, a day of violence and destruction. The whole world will be consumed and no amount of riches will be able to save a person from it.

God’s Judgment on the Nations (2:1-3:8)

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| Philistia (2:4-7) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-Philistia will face total destruction, there will be no one left in the land (2:5).-The faithful remnant from Judah will possess the land and God will restore them (2:7). |
| Moab and Ammon (2:8-11) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">-God swore to make Moab and the Ammonites like Sodom and Gomorrah. The remnant of His people will plunder them and possess the land (2:9).-The Lord will destroy their gods and will be worshipped by all nations (2:11). |

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| Cush (2:12) | -The Cushites will be slain by the sword (2:12). |
| Assyria (2:13-15) | -Assyria will be destroyed and Nineveh will be left completely desolate (2:13). -The land will be scoffed at and left to the animals because of the pride of the Assyrians (2:15). |
| Jerusalem (3:1-8) | -God calls Jerusalem a city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled (3:1), disobedient, and stubborn (3:2). They were unwilling to heed the warning of God's judgment on others and were eager to act corruptly (3:7). -He condemns the leaders of the city, both political and spiritual (3:3-4). |

Redemption of the Remnant (3:9-20)

- Through His judgment God will purify the people so that a remnant will remain who will call on Him (3:9, 13).
- He will remove the proud and the haughty from among them but will leave the meek and the humble that trust in His name (3:11-12).
- God will take away the punishment from His people and turn back their enemy (3:15). He will deal with Israel's oppressors, rescuing the lame and gathering the scattered (3:19-20). Then the people will have confidence that the Lord is with them and that He is mighty to save.

Themes

The Day of the Lord

- It was common in ancient near eastern documents to speak of "the day" of a great figure (E.g., a king). This was the day when the king was able to vanquish his enemy completely. In reality, wars lasted for years; the day was a metaphor for the king's great power and the certainty and totality of his enemies' destruction.
- The "day of the Lord" is mentioned seven times in Zephaniah (1:7, 8, 14(x2), 18; 2:2, 3). This is the day when God will appear with destructive judgment against sin to vindicate His own honour. It is also the day on which He will create a purified and holy remnant for Himself, showing faithfulness and mercy in the midst of disaster.
- The day of the Lord is portrayed as a day of global judgment when God will show that He is the God of all creation, not only of Israel, and that He rules over all nations and holds them to account.
- On that day people will face distress because of their sins against Him (1:17-18).
 - The end will come suddenly
 - The entire world will be consumed
 - Earthly riches will be useless to save, there will be no escape

God's Salvation

- It is in the midst of wrath that we are most able to see God's undeserved grace and restoration on those whom He has chosen (the gathering of the scattered remnant).
- In God, wrath and salvation are found together. Even within oracles of woe and destruction there are often elements of mercy and restoration (2:7, 9; 3:10-20).
- God extends a hope of salvation (being spared from His fierce anger) for the humble and obedient who seek righteousness and humility (2:3). In contrast, there is no call to repentance or offer of mercy for God's enemies.
- On the day of the Lord God will preserve a remnant for Himself, using judgment to refine and purify His people (3:9).

Conclusion

- The day of the Lord is fast approaching when God will bring devastation and judgment on the world for its sin but will purify for Himself a remnant that He will delight in and who will be gathered to dwell with Him forever.

-Our greatest problem, our need for reconciliation with God because of our sins, has been solved through Christ. Those who have put their faith in Him have no reason to fear the coming judgment. Rather, they can hope in the fulfillment of God's salvation for them on that day.

-In the meantime, we should be seeking the Lord in righteousness and humility (2:3) and learning to wait patiently and confidently for Him.

References

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