

NAHUM—WEEK 1

THE COMING STORM



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover picture is “The Prophet Nahum” by James Tissot (1836–1902), on display at the Jewish Museum, New York.

Judgement is coming to Nineveh. They were once mighty, and once repented, but all will be destroyed—completely.

This prophecy was fulfilled perfectly. Nineveh, which was once a great city, is now just an archeological dig.

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Nahum, Week 1 — The Coming Storm
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1 Nahum 1:1–5 (NKJV)

The burden against Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

<i>God is jealous, and the LORD avenges; The LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, And He reserves wrath for His enemies; The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And will not at all acquit the wicked.</i>	<i>And the clouds are the dust of His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, And dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, And the flower of Lebanon wilts. The mountains quake before Him, The hills melt, And the earth heaves at His presence, Yes, the world and all who dwell in it.</i>
<i>The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm,</i>	

Imagine seeing bits of this passage emblazoned on bumper stickers. Not exactly “Smile, God loves you,” eh? That sounds brutal, but not as brutal as a lot of other things.

Our theology begins with, “God created the universe.” You can’t get away from that. You also can’t get away from, “This is the universe God chose to create.”

Many people worship a god who would have never created this universe. The real world isn’t sugar-coated enough, so they worship a figment of their imagination. As Jack Nicholson might say, “They can’t handle the truth.”

Nature shows often leave out what it looks like (and sounds like) when a carnivore catches its prey. Fish don’t scream; everything else does. Life in the wild is all about eating and being eaten. God created a universe of cause and effect that reflects His just nature.

But then there’s this.

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
And will not at all acquit the wicked.*

In Jonah, we saw the Ninevites benefitting from God’s patience. But the lesson they learned didn’t stick, and ultimate justice is inevitable—ultimately.

Those of us who were taught from infancy about God’s love, see God’s mercy and grace as obvious. Of course He loves us; we’ve been singing about that all our lives. How could it be anything else?

But it could be anything else. We need to see His mercy and grace against the backdrop of the real universe, not “My Little Pony.” Justice is part of the structure of reality.

Otherwise, the cross is just silly.

2 Nahum 1:6–11 (NKJV)

*Who can stand before His indignation?
And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?
His fury is poured out like fire,
And the rocks are thrown down by Him.
The LORD is good,
A stronghold in the day of trouble;
And He knows those who trust in Him.
But with an overflowing flood
He will make an utter end of its place,
And darkness will pursue His enemies.*

*What do you conspire against the LORD?
He will make an utter end of it.
Affliction will not rise up a second time.
For while tangled like thorns,
And while drunken like drunkards,
They shall be devoured like stubble fully dried.
From you comes forth one
Who plots evil against the LORD,
A wicked counselor.*

This is one of those passages that doesn't make sense the first few times you read it. Nahum seems to be flipping back and forth between condemnations and blessings.

Nahum starts out ripping the Ninevites with maledictions like, "*His fury is poured out like fire, And the rocks are thrown down by Him.*"

But then he seems to shift gears and says, "*The LORD is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him.*" Then he shifts back again to, "*But with an overflowing flood He will make an utter end of its place, And darkness will pursue His enemies.*" What's going on?

Nahum's not shifting at all. He's busting on the Ninevites the whole time, even in the nice sounding parts.

The key is, "*And He knows those who trust in Him.*" Nahum is saying, "You guys blew it. You could have had it great, if you'd only stuck with the lesson you got from Jonah."

God has been paying attention the entire time.

When Jonah preached, Nineveh had a revival. They believed. They got it. Then they forgot.

The same thing has happened here multiple times.

It's like a four-cycle engine: intake, compression, firing, exhaust. We hit bottom spiritually, the Holy Spirit awakens us, we revive, we forget. Bottom, awakening, revival, complacency.

We desperately need another revival. We pray for revival often, but are we just praying for the next stage in an endless cycle?

Maybe, but what's wrong with that? Should we not pray for good things, even if they're temporary? Even praying for healing isn't asking for something that's permanent.

Besides, a revival glorifies God, and it affects some folks' eternal destiny.

3 Nahum 1:12–15 (NKJV)

Thus says the LORD:

“Though they are safe, and likewise many,
Yet in this manner they will be cut down
When he passes through.

Though I have afflicted you,
I will afflict you no more;
For now I will break off his yoke from you,
And burst your bonds apart.”

The LORD has given a command concerning you:
“Your name shall be perpetuated no longer.
Out of the house of your gods

I will cut off the carved image and the molded
image.

I will dig your grave,
For you are vile.”

Behold, on the mountains
The feet of him who brings good tidings,
Who proclaims peace!

O Judah, keep your appointed feasts,
Perform your vows.

For the wicked one shall no more pass through
you;
He is utterly cut off.

Here, Nahum does shift gears. He’s talking to Israel this time. All the bad news for Nineveh is good news for them.

And the news is the most profound yet. Even though Nineveh is at its peak of power (a historical fact), it will completely cease to exist (also a historical fact). “*Though they are safe, and likewise many, Yet in this manner they will be cut down.*” Nineveh, *that great city* (Jonah 1:2), was razed in 612 BC.

Nineveh should have become a popular tourist destination, like Jerusalem or Rome.

It would have—if it still existed. Instead, it’s just an archeological dig.

Few conquered cities vanish so completely. Jerusalem and Rome were conquered but didn’t *pass away*.

Another interesting city that’s now just an archeological dig is Dura Europos. It was far smaller than Nineveh but is now a great treasure. Early in the third century, it was threatened with invasion. In preparation, they filled all the houses in the city walls with dirt, effectively making super thick walls. It didn’t work; it was overrun anyway—then abandoned.

Dura Europos lay dormant for centuries, entombed in dirt and sand. In the 1930s, it was found and excavated, yielding up some of the oldest and most significant artifacts in Christianity. One of the houses in the walls was a Christian house church.

<https://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/bibleandculture/2010/01/the-church-in-the-house-in-dura-europos.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos_church

Fortunately, the archeologists moved all the artifacts to Yale. ISIS has destroyed everything that remains.

4 Nahum 2:1–4 (NKJV)

*He who scatters has come up before your face.
Man the fort!
Watch the road!
Strengthen your flanks!
Fortify your power mightily.*

*For the LORD will restore the excellence of
Jacob
Like the excellence of Israel,
For the emptiers have emptied them out
And ruined their vine branches.*

*The shields of his mighty men are made red,
The valiant men are in scarlet.
The chariots come with flaming torches
In the day of his preparation,
And the spears are brandished.
The chariots rage in the streets,
They jostle one another in the broad roads;
They seem like torches,
They run like lightning.*

Hey, Nineveh, guess what? This isn't about you. It's about Israel. You're just a bit player in this. Nahum warns Nineveh to:

*Man the fort!
Watch the road!
Strengthen your flanks!
Fortify your power mightily.*

But this is just a taunt. Their defeat is sure.

*For the LORD will restore the excellence of Jacob
Like the excellence of Israel,
For the emptiers have emptied them out
And ruined their vine branches.*

This prophecy is the key to the whole book. While Nahum writes many words about Nineveh's destruction, restoring *the splendor of Jacob* is the point. It's all about God keeping His promises.

His glory is the ultimate purpose of everything.

One of the great benefits of knowing God is being conscious of ultimate purposes. Life can be frustrating, especially when things seem to be going wrong.

But the Bible makes it clear, over and over, that God chooses more complex plot lines than simple, easy victories. We don't often get to see what God is up to, but when we do, everything else suddenly seems unimportant.

The world God created isn't simple, and life in it isn't simple either.

This can get frustrating, but it glorifies God more than a simple world would. That's comforting.

5 Nahum 2:5–9 (NKJV)

*He remembers his nobles;
They stumble in their walk;
They make haste to her walls,
And the defense is prepared.
The gates of the rivers are opened,
And the palace is dissolved.
It is decreed:
She shall be led away captive,
She shall be brought up;
And her maidservants shall lead her as with the
voice of doves,
Beating their breasts.*

*Though Nineveh of old was like a pool of water,
Now they flee away.
“Halt! Halt!” they cry;
But no one turns back.
Take spoil of silver!
Take spoil of gold!
There is no end of treasure,
Or wealth of every desirable prize.*

I like to use many different translations, because by reading them all, I learn details that I would miss if I only read one. But the various translations of this passage differ so greatly that if you read it in another translation, you can think you’re on the wrong page. That’s because it details war. The vocabulary of war is strange and constantly evolving.

“War is all hell.” — William Tecumseh Sherman

When people are uncomfortable with a subject, they talk differently. They don’t use common words. Thus, ancient descriptions of war are hard to translate.

This passage depicts siege warfare. The details are horrible—things like diverting a river to flood Nineveh and then hauling off everyone and everything that wasn’t destroyed by the flood.

Sherman knew what he was talking about.

Thank God most of us will never see the horrors of siege warfare. But what about spiritual warfare?

The Exorcist is a scarier movie than Saving Private Ryan—and for good reason. We understand Saving Private Ryan; the Exorcist, not so much. That’s what makes watching The Exorcist so scary. People don’t know exactly what’s true and what’s not true, but they know that something is true.

Much of what is true is explained in Revelation 12:4, Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25, and Daniel 10:13. We learn from Revelation that one-third of the angels fell and became demons. We learn from Matthew and Mark that they do not reproduce; there are a fixed number of them. They are incapable of time travel (otherwise, the angel in Daniel wouldn’t have to explain why he’s late.) They are thousands of years old.

Spiritual warfare is dreadful stuff. Our enemies are incredibly experienced in the art of deception.

There’s no way we can outsmart enemies like that. Depend on God or lose big every time.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's more important to you? Justice or mercy?
2. What grand things do you pray for?
3. God wipes out some of Israel's enemies but not others. Why?
4. What glorifies God most? Do you prioritize things based on this?
5. Have you ever noticed spiritual warfare in a situation? Did it scare you?