

# I've Got Good News And Bad News, And They're Both The Same

Nahum 1:1-3    March 6, 2024

The *Fragile State Index* ranks the nations of the world according to government control, public services, corruption and criminality, things like that. In their latest report, they have Somalia as the most fragile country in the world and Norway as the most stable. About 40 nations are considered *more stable* than the United States, including Israel, the UK, Estonia, and the Czech Republic.

650 years before Christ was born, the kingdom of Assyria was the strongest in the world, but it ranked number one on God's *Guilty State Index*. His mercy had expired. And God, Who loves to reveal His work to His people, showed a man named Nahum what was about to happen.

## **Nahum 1:1 - The pronouncement concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.**

Nahum had good news and bad news and they were both the same: Nineveh would be totally destroyed. It's bad news for Assyria, but the *rest* of the world would clap their hands in celebration.

Assyria was the very first world empire.<sup>1</sup> Their history stretches back to 5,000 BC when Nimrod first built the city of Nineveh.<sup>2</sup> Through the centuries, Assyrian history can be divided into three major eras: Old, Middle, and Neo. In the books of Kings, Chronicles, and the Prophets, the Assyrians loom large. That's during the *Neo-Assyrian period* - the time when they were the strongest and scariest.

Around 760 BC, Jonah preached to Nineveh. At the time, it was a great Assyrian city, but not yet the capital. The Bible records that the entire population of Nineveh (600,000-1,000,000 people)<sup>3</sup> turned to the Lord and were saved. Judgement was delayed for about 150 years.

But the revival didn't last and it didn't spread the other cities of Assyria. About 40 years after Jonah visited, around 722 BC, Assyria's king Sargon II and his army invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and destroyed it, leaving the nation of Judah in the south. During the time of Sargon and the three descendants that came after him, Assyria swelled in size and power.

Around 700 BC, King Sennacherib not only made Nineveh the capital of the empire, but started building it into "a metropolis of legendary size and splendor."<sup>4</sup> In fact, he made it into the largest urban center ever created in the Ancient Near East.

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<sup>1</sup> Eckart Frahm *Assyria: The Rise And Fall Of The World's First Empire*

<sup>2</sup> *The New American Commentary Volume 20: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, And Zephaniah*

<sup>3</sup> Charles Lee Feinberg *Jonah, Micah, And Nahum*

<sup>4</sup> Frahm

Through the 670's and 660's BC, the Assyrian empire continued its domination of the Biblical world. Their strength was unmatched. Their territory was vast. Their ferocity legendary. They terrorized Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt, Arabia, and the regions we know today as Iran and Armenia. There is an account where a certain king was threatened by Sargon and responded by stabbing himself in the heart.<sup>5</sup> *That* was preferable than facing the Assyrian Army.

At the height of their strength, an unknown Jewish man published a little book. In it, he says the most powerful empire the world had ever known, the empire that swallowed up nations and cultures wherever it went, was *suddenly* going to cease to exist. This would've sounded impossible. Ridiculous. Unhinged. This is *Assyria* we're talking about, not some little Philistine clan.

But Nahum was confident. He had *seen* it in advance. And when God says something is going to be done it *will* be done. There may be an interval - in Nahum's case it would be about 40 years, but God's history cannot be stopped.

Verse 1 opens with, "The pronouncement concerning Nineveh." The term means oracle or burden. Matthew Henry calls it the millstone that Nahum was hanging around Nineveh's neck.<sup>6</sup> There would be no second, second chance - no last minute delay. The Lord had published their eulogy.

This is the only prophetic book that's actually *called* a "book."<sup>7</sup> From what we can tell, Nahum arranged this work not as a *preacher*, but as a writer or composer.<sup>8</sup> It seems that he intended this book to be used in liturgy - for God's people to recite or sing it together at certain occasions.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars marvel at Nahum's poetic excellence. They call him "brilliant,"<sup>10</sup> - the "poet laureate of the Minor Prophets."<sup>11</sup> They say that this book has almost perfect symmetry and is full of all sorts of marvelous, literary style. One writer says, "*In its poetic form the book of Nahum has no superior within the prophetic literature of the [Old Testament].*"<sup>12</sup>

Aside from his poetic skill, we don't know a lot about Nahum. All we're told is that he is an Elkoshite. It's probably telling us that he was from the town of Elkosh, but over the centuries there have been a lot of suggestions about what that means. One tradition is that this village was later renamed "The village of Nahum," or, as we've heard it *Capernaum*.<sup>13</sup> That's one theory.

His name means "comfort."<sup>14</sup> And so, as one commentator calls him, Mr. Compassion from Capernaum has a message of hope: Everyone in Nineveh is going to die.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel David Luckenbill *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry *Commentary On The Whole Bible: Complete And Unabridged In One Volume*

<sup>7</sup> *NAC*

<sup>8</sup> James Smith *The Minor Prophets*

<sup>9</sup> Duane L. Christensen *The Book Of Nahum As Liturgical Composition: A Prosodic Analysis*

<sup>10</sup> Smith

<sup>11</sup> Richard D. Patterson *Nahum: Poet Laureate Of The Minor Prophets*

<sup>12</sup> Christensen

<sup>13</sup> *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

<sup>14</sup> *CSB Study Bible Notes*

<sup>15</sup> Smith

How is that a message of comfort? It was a comfort to *God's* people, who for more than 100 years had been subjugated, threatened, and crushed by the Assyrian Empire. A *century* of fear and violence, and serfdom. God was going to put a stop to it. God was going to rescue them.

**Nahum 1:2 - <sup>2</sup>The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is fierce in wrath. The Lord takes vengeance against his foes; he is furious with his enemies.**

Nahum's vision shows what would happen to the city of Nineveh, but it's really a book about *God*. It is a book about His power and justice - how His long-suffering mercy does, eventually expire. It's about His absolute standard of right and wrong and how it applies to *everyone*.<sup>16</sup>

The Lord said, "Nineveh, you are My foe. You are my *enemy*, and I pour out wrath against My enemies."

Of course, there had been a time when the people of Nineveh became the *friends* of God. Read it in Jonah chapter 3. They turned to God from their sin and received His mercy. We learned that *anyone* can become a friend of God. But then they turned away from God back to their sin.

Nahum will mention Nineveh's fall as future. That happened in 612 BC. He also mentions the destruction of the city of Thebes as a past event. That happened in 664 BC. So, he's writing in a 50 year window. But scholars narrow it down more, using different criteria. It seems likely that we're somewhere around 654 BC. That would mean that Ashurbanipal is king of Assyria and Manasseh is king of Judah. Assyria is incredibly strong and Israel is incredibly weak, physically *and* spiritually.

God says He is a jealous avenger. The Lord will use some very graphic language in this book. Sometimes we shy away from thinking of God's wrath the way He depicts it on these pages. It feels inappropriate or unloving. In fact, some have labeled Nahum a false prophet, spewing a hymn of hate.<sup>17</sup> But that isn't true. And God isn't wrong for His wrath and vengeance.

We have a hard-wired understanding of how important justice is. Why do we cheer when the heroes kill the villains? Why is *The Avengers* the most successful franchise of all time? Because evil *must* be stopped. Guilt *must* be punished. Wrong *must* be made right.

We have that inherent understanding *because* God has written His moral law on our hearts. But now our hearts and the whole world around us has been corrupted by sin. And sin proliferates until God brings either revival or judgment. He does not take sin lightly. He *is* compassionate, He is merciful, but ultimately sin *must* be dealt with, both on a personal level and a national level.

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<sup>16</sup> CSB Study Bible Notes

<sup>17</sup> NAC

We're told God is *jealous*. That means, on the one hand, that He is *zealous* for justice.<sup>18</sup> But it also a reminder that He is jealous for *you* - for your heart. The great desire of the God of the universe is to be in a loving, personal relationship with you. When we turn and say, "No, *this* is god," or, "I'm god in my life," it breaks the Lord's heart. And when *nations* do that, they are telling God, "Instead of Your *warmth*, we'd rather have Your *wrath*."

Nahum tells us that God is *fierce* in wrath. It means He is the *Master* of wrath.<sup>19</sup> We think so quickly that God is a God of love - and He is - but He is also the Lord of wrath. He *must* wield His holy wrath, otherwise justice cannot exist and evil would triumph.

Nineveh had it coming. But, remember, they had had it coming for *centuries*. This wasn't an impulsive outburst of anger for the Lord. He had waited and waited and tried and tried to give them a chance to repent. Nahum shows the tension between God's wrath and His mercy in verse 3.

**Nahum 1:3 - <sup>3</sup>The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will never leave the guilty unpunished. His path is in the whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust beneath his feet.**

We are told *many* times that the Lord is slow to anger. Exodus, Numbers, Joel, Nehemiah, Psalms. In *every* instance, the phrase "slow to anger" is followed up by a description of God's love and mercy...*but not here*. For the Assyrians, time was up. No more mercy. Now, in place of mercy we see God's *power*.

The Lord calls out to the Ninevites and says, "I see you and I'm cutting a path straight for you." You see, God is *meek*, but He is not *weak*.<sup>20</sup> He is Judge of the universe and the guilty will not walk free.

The city of Nineveh was a spectacular fortress. The kings had spent decades building it up. Her walls were 100 feet tall and wide enough for three chariots to ride abreast along the top. It's said that there were 1,500 guard towers of defense.<sup>21</sup> The city was surrounded by a moat, 150 feet wide and 50 feet deep.<sup>22</sup>

The army of Assyria was unmatched. Their society was the first to make war a science.<sup>23</sup> Their kings used to call themselves "The rulers of the universe."<sup>24</sup> And now, at the pinnacle of their power, the *real* Ruler of the universe said, "I'm coming. And walls and moats and towers won't help you, because I walk on the clouds. I come in the whirlwind." We'll see that weather would play a decisive role in the fall of this great city.

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<sup>18</sup> Feinberg

<sup>19</sup> Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

<sup>20</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 7: Daniel And The Minor Prophets*

<sup>21</sup> Feinberg

<sup>22</sup> Paul Haupt *Xenophon's Account of the Fall of Nineveh*

<sup>23</sup> *The Assyrians: The History of the Most Prominent Empire of the Ancient Near East*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

The Lord told them He was coming to judge because they were *guilty*. What were they guilty of? Well, the book breaks into 3 parts. Chapter 1 is a song of triumph. Chapter 2 is a taunting letter to the king, describing what's going to happen to his capital city. Chapter 3 gives us the *reasons* for their judgment and God's justification.<sup>25</sup>

So, what were they guilty of? Nineveh was called a "city of blood." The violence of the Assyrian empire is shocking. The kings would often flay their enemies alive and set them on fire. At times, they would preserve the skin of their victims in salt to put on display as a decoration in their palace.<sup>26</sup> They made one defeated ruler walk through the city with the severed head of another defeated ruler hanging around his neck, then publicly slaughtered him like an animal. They forced the sons of defeated kings to grind their fathers bones in the city gates.<sup>27</sup> They mutilated their captives, and constantly impaled people on poles.

These kings decorated their palace walls with carvings of torture and brutality. During Nahum's time, Ashurbanipal would force emissaries coming to see him to lick the doorsill of his palace. He was truly a sadist.<sup>28</sup> This was a city of blood - an empire built by bloodshed.

The Lord *also* condemns them for being a city full of deceit and plunder, wanton materialism and sorcery. The king had a fanatical devotion to divination.<sup>29</sup> The people, too, had all sorts of rituals and incantations for different problems or situations in life. They rejected the God Who had revealed Himself to them and instead worshiped the creation.

Violence, materialism, idolatry, cruelty, deceit. These made Nineveh guilty in the eyes of God.

The problem is that *Jerusalem* was guilty of the same things. Ezekiel and Micah use these descriptors of Judah.<sup>30</sup> It wasn't just a Gentile problem. And if *Assyria* deserved wrath, what about Judah? Nahum's king was *Manasseh*. The *worst* king Judah would ever have. 2 Chronicles 33 tells us that God tried to speak to Manasseh and his people but they *wouldn't* listen. They did *worse* evil than the nations around them.<sup>31</sup> But God's standard is constant, so, judgment came to them, too.

What about the United States? Where are we on the *Guilty State Index*? It's easy to criticize or pile on. I get uncomfortable when I hear people say things like, "If God doesn't judge America, He owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology." God doesn't owe *anyone* an apology. And I don't want to suggest that it would be a super terrific time if God poured out His wrath on the United States.

At the same time, we have to look around and say, "Things are not good." People argue over whether America was a Christian nation at its founding. Ok. We're *not* a Christian nation now. In the same way that Nineveh was no longer a believing city. Instead, we are a nation full of violence,

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<sup>25</sup> Hobart Freeman *Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk: Minor Prophets Of The Seventh Century*

<sup>26</sup> Frahm

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> John Goldingay *The Lost Letters To The Twelve Prophets*

<sup>31</sup> 2 Chronicles 33:9-10

materialism, perversion, hatred, wicked spirituality. This is not a good position to be in. This is not a society that pleases God with its justice and righteousness and compassion and humility.

I'll say this: Assyria was one of the worst societies of all time. What they considered good and normal was horrifying. But you know what? Even the Assyrians thought abortion was wrong.<sup>32</sup>

God has an unwavering standard of good. People talk about being on the "right" side of history. We need to get on the right side of theology. Our society needs revival. Revival does not start at the ballot box. Change of leadership can happen as a *result* of revival, but revival starts right here in the house of God. It starts with me. It starts with my repentance and devotion to God and His truth. Righteousness is what shields a nation from the wrath of God. Being God's friend is what matters in a life and in a community.

As we read this little book it begs the question: Did Nineveh actually receive this message? We're not sure. There's no specific record of Nahum sending it. I will say this: God works hard to get the message out. Look at Jonah. We know He *loved* the Assyrian people, warts and all.

And I think this is an interesting element to consider: Nineveh was home to an immense library. In fact, it's considered the world's first "universal" library.<sup>33</sup> Ashurbanipal sought to assemble *all* the written knowledge of Mesopotamia. It had all sorts of books. History and sorcery and philosophy and old epics and botanical works. They've even found collections of jokes and riddles there.

Isn't it interesting that, of *all* the prophetic writings, Nahum's is the only *book*? The only one prepared *not* as a sermon, but something to be read? Perhaps they received it after all.

God wants to get His word out. He wants people to know the reality of sin and judgment so that they can be *saved* from it. What Nahum drives home is that the Lord is coming with destruction for His foes and deliverance for His friends. We can trust Him to do what He said and we should concern ourselves with being in right relationship with Him for our own blessing, our own benefit, and for the sake of the society around us that is in *desperate* need of God's mercy.

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<sup>32</sup> Frahm

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*