

You're Gonna Need A Bigger Moat

Nahum 1:4-8 March 13, 2024

In 1996, two American analysts coined the term *shock and awe* to describe the US Army's onslaught against the Iraqi military during Operation Desert Storm.¹ *Shock and Awe* is a strategy based on rapid dominance of an enemy through overwhelming force.

We may have come up with the slogan, but we didn't come up with the strategy. Thousands of years before Gulf War I - *in the same region of the world* - the God of the Bible explained His shock and awe plan to destroy His Assyrian enemies.

In Nahum's time, the Assyrian Empire was the dominant force in the known world. The capital city of Nineveh had immense fortifications - walls 100 feet tall, a moat 150 feet wide, 1,500 towers of defense.² They had state-of-the-art chariots³ and battle strategies that allowed them to conquer cities very quickly.⁴ It's been said that they had the first long-range army - able to travel as rapidly as armies did in World War I.⁵

But all their power and dominance meant *nothing* when Jehovah declared war on them. The God of Judah would lay waste to the entire empire, with shocking intensity and awesome power.

In verses 1 through 3 of this chapter, we are told Who God *is*. Now, Nahum starts to describe what God *does*.⁶ And, what He does is breathtaking.

Nahum 1:4 - ⁴He rebukes the sea and dries it up, and he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither; even the flower of Lebanon withers.

In our first study, we saw how Yahweh was described as the Master of wrath, riding the clouds, and coming in a whirlwind and storm. It's easy for us to miss a point Nahum was trying to make to both the Assyrian audience *and* the people of Judah, many of which were worshipping the Assyrian gods (including Judah's King Manasseh).⁷

You see, Nahum makes a play on words. When he said Yahweh is fierce in wrath in verse 2, he says that He is the *baal* of wrath. The word means Lord or Master. The gods of Canaan and Assyria had the *proper* name, Baal, often followed with another name, like Baal-Hadad. He was the "major deity of the Hittites, Syrians, and Assyrians."⁸ His titles were, "Almighty," "Lord of the Earth," and "Rider of the Clouds." As a god of the storms, Baal-Hadad was in charge of agriculture and the land's fertility.

¹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100502693>

² Charles Lee Feinberg *Jonah, Micah, And Nahum*

³ *Chariots In Neo-Assyrian Army* <https://arkeonews.net/chariots-in-neo-assyrian-army/>

⁴ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-11-09/ty-article/archaeologists-reveal-secrets-of-assyrian-war-machine-that-conquered-ancient-judah/>

⁵ <https://africame.factsanddetails.com/article/entry-86.html>

⁶ *The New American Commentary Volume 20: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, And Zephaniah*

⁷ 2 Kings 21

⁸ <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Baal>

But Baal had a problem and his name was Yamm. Yamm is the name of the god of the rivers and sea. Yamm and Baal didn't like each other. In the mythological stories, they would fight. Baal would ultimately triumph, but only after being killed and sent to the underworld, then rising from the dead. This happens again and again, year after year, in what is called the Baal Cycle.⁹

So here's Nahum saying, "There's a *master* of wrath coming. And *He* doesn't get captured by His enemies. *He's* not afraid of the seas or the rivers. *He's* not stuck in an annual cycle where He has to struggle for supremacy. The *real* Rider on the clouds has *total control* over all creation."

Now, Nahum is - on one level - meeting his audience where they are, using language that would get their attention. But he is *not* saying that Baal and Yahweh are the same god. People sometimes do that today and say things like "Christians and Muslims both worship the God of Abraham." Or, "The Jesus of the Bible and the Jesus that the Mormons believe in are the same Person." These are *not* the same people. One is a false god, the other is the true God.

Nahum alludes to the fact that *his* God is the One, real, proven God. When he says, "My God dries up seas and rivers," it's actually true. The children of Israel crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground. Decades later, the tribes crossed the Jordan, though it was at flood stage.¹⁰

Our God *actually* does things. Not just in mythology, but in *reality*. What does He say about His doings? What is He doing in this day and age? We discover those things in His Word.

The Assyrians should've paid close attention because, during these years when Nahum wrote, they were experiencing a severe drought. I'm convinced by the scholars who put Nahum's writing around 654 BC. In 657 BC, we have this record from one of Assyria's royal astrologers: "The rains were so scanty this year that no harvest was reaped."¹¹ The land was drying up.

Where was Baal? Well, he didn't exist. *Yahweh* does exist, and He was coming with ferocity. The drought announced His approach. All of creation gives way to Him. Nothing stands in His way.

These three regions mentioned - Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon - were known for lush growth. Bashan was famous for its pastures, Carmel for its vineyards, Lebanon for its forests.¹² These regions were the *least* likely to be affected by drought.¹³ But the Lord says, "This wrath is going to be so severe, even this garden spots won't survive." Those places were beautiful and significant to the world economy, but not more important than righteousness and justice.

Nahum 1:5 - ⁵The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt; the earth trembles at his presence—the world and all who live in it.

⁹ <https://www.worldhistory.org/Yamm/>

¹⁰ Joshua 3:15-17

¹¹ Eckart Frahm *Assyria: The Rise And Fall Of The World's First Empire*

¹² Feinberg

¹³ NAC

Rivers can be diverted. New technologies replace the old. Kingdoms rise and fall. But *mountains*? Mountains endure. There isn't anything more permanent, more imposing than a mountain.

Speaking of the Caucasus mountain range, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote:

*"If all the people who had ever lived had opened their arms as wide as they could to carry all that they had ever made, or ever thought of making, and piled it up in swelling heaps, they could not have raised such an unbelievable mountain range."*¹⁴

About 150 miles from Nineveh, right in the middle of the Assyrian empire under Ashurbanipal, there was a volcano named Nemrot. It was named after Nimrod, the ancient builder of Nineveh.

In 657 BC there wasn't just a drought, there was *also* an eruption at Nemrot. It's believed that a nearby city was suddenly consumed by the catastrophe.¹⁵ An Assyrian Pompeii.

So, with these events fresh in the minds of the readers, the Lord says, "I'm coming. Green pastures will wither. Mountains will melt in My presence. When I show up, *the whole earth* shakes." If a city was helpless before the eruption of *one* volcano, what could they do when the *Maker* of volcanoes arrives in wrath? What good is a moat? What good is a wall? What good is an armory?

In this verse, we see all of creation giving way to the Lord. Creation *knows* the truth. There are some remarkable verses in the Bible about what creation *knows* about God.

Psalm 104:21 - ²¹The young lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.

Revelation 5:13 - ¹³I heard every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, on the sea, and everything in them say, Blessing and honor and glory and power be to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!

Job 12:7-9 - ⁷But ask the animals, and they will instruct you; ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you. ⁸Or speak to the earth, and it will instruct you; let the fish of the sea inform you. ⁹Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?

Man rebels. Creation obeys. It *groans* in anticipation of God's redemptive work to be completed.

Nahum 1:6 - ⁶Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his burning anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; even rocks are shattered before him.

The answer to these questions is obvious: No one. God cannot be held back. He can't be tricked. There's no slipping out the back door before He notices you're getting away.

¹⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn *August 1914*

¹⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nemrut_\(volcano\)#Historical_role](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nemrut_(volcano)#Historical_role)

“Withstand” is a term used of warriors trying to hold their ground in battle.¹⁶ What a tragic lunacy that human beings fight against God. We fight Him in our hearts, but we *literally* fight Him, too.

In Revelation 16, we read about mountains being leveled, a great storm bringing destruction to the earth - how God dries up the Euphrates river. What do the kings of the earth do? They gather together in the valley of Jezreel, in Hebrew, Armageddon. And when the Lord Jesus arrives, the armies of earth turn to wage war against Him.

The end of the story is very similar to what we see in miniature with Nineveh. The term Nahum uses for the hills “melting” in verse 5 means dissolved. Here’s what Peter says about the *next* time the Lord comes to earth:

2 Peter 3:12 - Because of that day, the heavens will be dissolved with fire and the elements will melt with heat.

There is no escape for the enemies of God. Rocks here in verse 6 can refer to high rocks on which you take refuge.¹⁷ But no fortress will be safe. God is coming to judge.

Nahum 1:7 - ⁷The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of distress; he cares for those who take refuge in him.

We have this dramatic contrast between the furious wrath of God and His tender grace. If you are a friend of God, you don’t need to cower in terror before Him. His power is exercised toward you in kindness and goodness. In every way, God is good. In His actions, in His choices, in His attitudes, in His character, in His behavior, in His desires, in His reasonings. He is *always* good.

Again we see a contrast: Here are the Assyrians, hiding behind tall walls, or running up to a craggy fortress, hoping that will shield them from judgment. Meanwhile, God says, “No, *I* am the fortress. *I* am the refuge. *I* am the Rock of salvation.” And He promises to *embrace* those who trust in Him.¹⁸ What a wonderful thought: That the strength of God’s embrace is equal to the power of His wrath.

Why did God part the Red Sea? *Why* did He part the Jordan? *Why* did He go to war with Death and Grave? So that His people could know His love. So His people could be wrapped in His tender embrace. So we would have a place of refuge from evil, from guilt, from failure, and shame.

The Lord *proved* this truth to the people of Judah again and again, but He had *specifically* saved them on their day of distress when Manasseh’s father, Hezekiah, was besieged by the Assyrian army. In an astonishing, miraculous turn of events, God delivered them from disaster.

¹⁶ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

¹⁷ John Goldingay, Pamela Scalise *Minor Prophets II*

¹⁸ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

Sadly, just a few years later, the people of Judah had abandoned their trust in the Lord and wriggled free of His embrace. Now they, too, were headed toward judgment.

Nahum 1:8 - ⁸But he will completely destroy Nineveh with an overwhelming flood, and he will chase his enemies into darkness.

Nahum's statement here is historic fact to us, but it would've been a bold claim of faith at the time. Remember - Assyria dominated the world. Judah was under Assyria's thumb. How could the world's greatest superpower be toppled from her place?

Well, Nahum had *seen* it. He had heard it from God. He believed the promises and knew God does what He says. And so, even though the circumstances said the opposite, Nahum trusted the Lord.

He said God's judgment is like a flood. The truth is, a *literal* flood would play a prominent role in the fall of Nineveh.¹⁹ During a siege, the Tigris river suddenly overflowed and washed away two and a half miles of Nineveh's walls and the foundations of the palace.²⁰

But this was not just about getting rid of a *city*. The Lord would chase the Assyrian people "into darkness." Again, there is a subtle contrast between Yahweh and Assyria's Baal. *Their* god would be dragged into the underworld once a year. *Our* God is the One chasing His enemies into the grave. He is not only Lord over creation, He is Lord over the next life, too.

Nineveh is not specifically named in the Hebrew text. Some Bible translations add it for clarity. The truth is, this wasn't just a one-time thing God was doing to Nineveh. God judges. We talked about that last week. These images from Nahum give us a bunch of foreshadowing for the *next* time the Lord will arrive on earth. When He does, He's coming with judgment, not for one city or one empire, but against the whole world. He will be a refuge for those who trust in Him, but His wrath will be unescapable for those who don't.

We're seeing Who God is and what He does in this opening chapter. It gives at least four present day truths to apply to our lives and keep in our minds.

First, Jesus Christ is most definitely God. This is certainly not the only place that proves that, but add it to the pile. When Jesus came to earth the first time, He commanded the wind and the waves. He could speak and a fig tree withered. When He gave up His spirit on the cross, the earth shook. Rocks were split. Tombs were opened. The God of Nahum is the God of the Gospels.

Jesus is our Refuge. In the storms, in the midst of wind and waves, we are safe with Him. He said "I have overcome the world," and so we do not need to be afraid. He is our Helper and Shepherd and Rock of strength. *On Christ the solid Rock we stand. All other ground is sinking sand.*

¹⁹ Feinberg

²⁰ Walter Kaiser *The Preachers Commentary, Volume 23*

Second, God is not to be trifled with. Look at His power. Look at His justice. Look at His attitude toward sin. If you're a Christian, you do not need to *cower* before Him, but we should *concern* ourselves with honoring Him, obeying Him, and pleasing Him.

Third, embrace the God Who longs to embrace you. Fill your heart with reminders of His tender care. His strength is poured out toward you in goodness and grace and kindness.

Fourth, let's keep in mind that God Who came to Sinai, Who came to Nineveh, Who came to Bethlehem is coming *again*. He has *shown* it. He's written it down. He's promised it. And so, we should hold that hope and live accordingly. He is going to chase His enemies into darkness, but carry His people into glory and rest, forever and ever.