

Why Woe, Why Woe? It's Off To Filth We Go.

Nahum 3:1-7 April 17, 2024

If you do a Google search for the phrase, "God has some explaining to do," you will be met with *many* results from Christians and non-Christians and *pretend* Christians alike. Usually the articles are about suffering or after some tragic event. How could God allow something terrible to happen?

I listened to a song titled *My God (Has Some Explaining To Do)*.¹ The artist sings about general sad things and comes to this line: "If I'm ever to believe that His Word is true, my God has some explaining to do."

In the aftermath of the Las Vegas massacre, Shannon Johnson Kershner said, "God has some explaining to do." Who is she? Just the pastor of a 5,500-member church in Chicago - the second largest Presbyterian church in the country.² She's also on record saying that God is "not a Christian" and that Christianity is not the only way to heaven.

Terrible things happen in this world to individuals and to nations. We're see them day-in and day-out in the news. The common response is, "How could God allow such tragedy?"

Of course, we know all that tragedy is *because* of humans - specifically because of our sin. Now God works to *redeem* what's been lost and marred by our sin. And, the truth is, He does not need to explain *anything* to us, and yet *He loves to do just that!* He goes to considerable trouble to reveal and explain and contextualize and instruct and help us understand why things are the way they are and how we can partner with Him so that *more* lives can be saved, *more* societies can be benefitted, more redemption can take place around the world.

The book of Nahum is all about God revealing the terrible things that were going to happen to a terrible empire, but also explaining *why*. It wasn't because He delights in human suffering - it's because when He offered life and forgiveness, His offer was rejected.

In our text we see *why* Nineveh was doomed. He wants other societies to avoid Assyria's fate.

Nahum 3:1 - Woe to the city of blood, totally deceitful, full of plunder, never without prey.

Nineveh was guilty of extreme levels of violence, deceit, robbery, and oppression. I've covered some of their atrocities in previous weeks. They were unmatched in brutality. Did you know the Assyrians invented crucifixion?³ They decorated their palaces with remains of their victims. They displayed their enemies in merciless and barbarous ways around town.

¹ Malcolm Ruhl *My God (Has Some Explaining To Do)*

² <https://www.christianpost.com/news/christianity-is-not-the-only-way-to-heaven-prominent-presbyterian-pastor-says.html>

³ Peter Preskar *The Assyrians — The Appalling Lords of Torture*

Assyrian “diplomacy” was based on lies, intimidation, and force. They would make peace *then* attack.⁴ They would often break truces and their promises to other nations.⁵ When Assyria besieged Jerusalem, they promised everyone would have their own fig tree and their own vine and their own cistern. Give in to Assyria and you would live in peace and prosperity.⁶

What was the reality? Look at the example of Manasseh:

2 Chronicles 33:10-11 - ¹⁰The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they didn’t listen. ¹¹So he brought against them the military commanders of the king of Assyria. They captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze shackles, and took him to Babylon.

Assyria didn’t just take, they ripped apart.⁷ They delighted in violence and oppression. As a result, God pronounced a woe on them.

The Old Testament prophets used this term a lot. It was most often used as a warning that God’s physical chastisement was coming.⁸ It was also used as a lament for the dead.⁹ God wasn’t happy that these people would die. But He had waited for *decades* for Nineveh to turn from their sin, to show some sign of repentance, but it never came.¹⁰ And so, the only other option was wrath.

Nahum 3:2 - ²The crack of the whip and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and jolting chariot!

The Assyrians are reaping what they sowed. That is a spiritual principle explained to us in the Bible. The choices we make come bundled with consequences. They had been the attackers, now they were the victims. If you sow to the flesh, you’re going to reap destruction.¹¹

Here in verse 2, Nahum focuses on the *sounds*. Crack and rumble and the pounding of the hooves. This year, the *Academy Award* for Best Sound didn’t go to a sci-fi epic or action-adventure full of explosions and car chases. The Oscar went to a movie called *Zone Of Interest*. It tells the story of the family life of the commandant of Auschwitz, who lived in a house next to the camp. I haven’t seen the movie, but I saw a clip where they’re out on their lawn, having a regular day, and in the background you hear the muffles of what was happening *in* the camp. It’s haunting and sickening - the wholesale destruction of a people. That’s what Assyria was doomed for.

Nahum 3:3 - ³Charging horseman, flashing sword, shining spear; heaps of slain, mounds of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over their dead.

⁴ James Bruckner *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*

⁵ Walter Kaiser *The Preachers Commentary, Volume 23*

⁶ 2 Kings 18:31

⁷ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

⁸ *The Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

⁹ David Baker *Nahum, Habakkuk, And Zephaniah*

¹⁰ Kaiser

¹¹ Galatians 6:7-8

Now Nahum focuses on the *sights* of the judgment. The warfare was so savage, even the Babylonians called what happened an “evil” thing...*and they were the ones that did it!*¹²

Assyrian kings used to pile up corpses of their enemies. They paraded mangled and disfigured captives. That’s how they *decorated* their palaces. Now, they would become part of the furniture.

Where once they had an endless heap of treasure, now they had an endless pile of death. This was the inevitable result of a life in rebellion against God.

Nahum 3:4 - ⁴Because of the continual prostitution of the prostitute, the attractive mistress of sorcery, who treats nations and clans like merchandise by her prostitution and sorcery,

In addition to the lies and violence and oppression and greed, Assyria was *deep* into idolatry, sorcery, and immorality of every kind. This second list is added to the charges.

The Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal had “almost fanatical devotion to divination.”¹³ The library of Nineveh had many tablets full of occult rituals and incantations.¹⁴ There were rituals for farmers, incantations for meeting with public officials. They divined using oil or the entrails of slaughtered animals.¹⁵

And then there was the idolatry. Assyria worshiped a variety of gods. They were particularly fond of Ishtar, and they often referred to her as a prostitute.¹⁶

On top of these practices, Assyria would entice other nations to take on their culture - to join with them and become like them. During Nahum’s time, King Manasseh was converting the Temple of Jerusalem to paganism. Altars to Baal, poles for Asherah, altars to the stars of the sky. He burned his sons for these pagan gods and did all sorts of witchcraft and divination, just like the Assyrians.¹⁷ He was enamored and enticed by their wealth and their power and their culture. And what happened? He wanted to be their friend. What did *they* want? They wanted his money and his territory and his life. They came and ensnared him, dragged him off with hooks.

Nahum 3:5 - ⁵I am against you. This is the declaration of the Lord of Armies. I will lift your skirts over your face and display your nakedness to nations, your shame to kingdoms.

The action here in verse 5 is shocking, but God is simply exposing what they were already doing. It reminds me of those social media accounts that just repost TikTok videos and people get all upset. Hey, they’re just showing what you put out!

¹² *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 7: Daniel And The Minor Prophets*

¹³ Gregory Cook *Ashurbanipal’s Peace And The Date Of Nabum*

¹⁴ Eckart Frahm *Assyria: The Rise And Fall Of The World’s First Empire*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *The New American Commentary Volume 20: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, And Zephaniah*

¹⁷ 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

The language is harsh, but the Lord is saying to the world, "You think Assyria is the queen of the earth right now, you think she's the strongest, greatest, most enviable. Take a look after I remove her trappings of power - the palaces and the gold and the art and the finery.¹⁸ Let's look *behind* the curtain and see what's underneath."

I think our tendency is to read verse 5 and feel a little uncomfortable and think, "Lord, that's not very loving." The truth is, it would be unloving for God *not* to judge Assyria. They had victimized the whole world for centuries and had *refused* to go God's way, even when He gave them a gracious, merciful chance year after year, decade after decade, and now it was time for the reckoning.

Every culture, every person must face their Creator one day. The accounts must be settled. Judgment has to happen. If you want to stand before God in your own strength, in your own ability, in your own merit, then you're going to be like Assyria. You're going to be uncovered before Him and all that will be left is your shame and your guilt.

But if you are willing to turn from your sin and receive *salvation*, what happens? Then God, by His grace, *clothes* you in His righteousness. You are covered. And when God sees you, He sees you perfect and redeemed in His Son. And instead of your shame being on display, the immeasurable riches of His grace are displayed in you.¹⁹

Nahum 3:6 - *6* I will throw filth on you and treat you with contempt; I will make a spectacle of you.

Our buddy Ashurbanipal once captured an enemy leader and put him on display as a fun spectacle for his people. Here's what the king wrote:

*"I pierced his chin with my keen hand dagger. Through his jaw I passed a rope, put a dog chain upon him and made him occupy a kennel of the east gate of Nineveh."*²⁰

Sin is awful. James explains to us that when sin is fully grown it gives birth to death. Now, most of us don't act like Assyrian kings, but sin is the same. Sin bears the same fruit in a heart. And God cannot pretend like sin is no big deal. He *must* judge it and it is *right* for Him to do so.

When an individual continues in a life of sin, the result is waste and ruin and, ultimately, death. When a *nation* continues into a culture of sin and rebellion against God, the result is Assyria - not just the horrors of the culture, but ultimately the destruction of that nation.

God says there, "I'm going to treat you with contempt" (your version may say "make you vile"). Literally the words can read, "I will treat you as a fool."²¹

¹⁸ James Smith *The Minor Prophets*

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:7

²⁰ Hobart Freeman *Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk: Minor Prophets Of The Seventh Century*

²¹ NAC

The Assyrians were fools. They could've escaped judgment, but they *wouldn't* turn to God. And so, God allowed them to go their own way, and this is the result.

Nahum 3:7 - ⁷Then all who see you will recoil from you, saying, "Nineveh is devastated; who will show sympathy to her?" Where can I find anyone to comfort you?

Not only was there no one to show them sympathy, we'll see at the end of the chapter that everyone in the world was going to *applaud* the fall of the empire. None of Assyria's peers thought God was going to far in His treatment of this nation. To all of them it had been a long time coming.

In the end, there was no one there to comfort Assyria. The saddest part of that statement is the fact that *God Himself* had wanted to be their Comforter. That's always what He wants.

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

But Assyria said, "No. We're going this way. We like our culture. We like our weapons. We like our chances on our own."

Worst of all, Judah was going the same way. In verse 1, Nineveh was called the city of blood. Both before *and* after Nahum, other prophets would call Jerusalem a city of blood, built on a foundation of bloodshed. In Micah 3, God says to the leaders of Israel, "You guys tear off people's skin and devour them...kinda like the Assyrians." In Hosea and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Lord repeated tells His people, "you also are guilty of harlotry - you're acting like spiritual prostitutes."

The Assyrians are an *example*, not a tall-tale. They show what happens when a people turn from God and refuse God and reject God. The end is the death of their nation. The *only* way for a people to find refuge and comfort and redemption is by running to the Lord and receiving His mercy. To turn their backs on greed and injustice and violence and immorality and instead say, "We believe God, we trust that His way is the only way to life, and so we're going to go that way."

As individuals and as a nation we have this choice. The Assyrian way comes along and says, "Go with us and everyone will get their own cistern, their own vine, their own fig tree. It's gonna be great. Pay no attention to the mounds of bodies left behind us. Pay no attention to our track record or the rot beneath the surface." Meanwhile, the Lord says, "Go My way and the result is rest and life and hope. God promises that in *His* Kingdom:

Micah 4:3-4 - ³He will settle disputes among many peoples and provide arbitration for strong nations that are far away. They will beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning knives. Nation will not take up the sword against nation, and they will never again train for war. ⁴But each person will sit under his grapevine and under his fig tree with no one to frighten him.

How's our nation doing? Could we be found guilty of bloodshed and deceit and greed and oppression? How about idolatry, sorcery, immorality? Yesterday after watching a YouTube video some random ad started playing. The opening line was, "*Can ancient witchcraft unlock the secret to luxuriant hair growth?*" Our nation needs revival. And that starts with me. But we need to have a Jonah 3 moment so that our nation doesn't have to face a Nahum 3 moment.

Have you heard it said that Shakespeare's comedies end with a wedding and the tragedies end in death? That's really the choice set before us. If we go with the Lord, the result is joy, leading to the wedding feast of the Lamb. If we go our way, the result is death and judgment. God has explained all of this and set before us life and death, blessing and curse. Choose wisely.