

IV. “Behold, on the Mountains ...”

23-Mar-03 Nahum 1:15-2:13

Theme: The salvation of God’s people and blessings upon them come with the destruction of God’s enemies.

Key Verse: Nahum 1:15 “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.”

Review

Last week we looked at the opening chapter of Nahum’s prophecy concerning the burden against Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Historians give varied reasons for Nineveh’s fall—internal corruption, the rise of Babylon, external and otherwise unpredictable factors. But however these may have contributed, the true answer is given by Nahum at the start of his prophecy. The avenging wrath of God destroyed it.

The idea of God’s vengeance is developed in 1:2-6. First there is an emphasis upon vengeance itself. Vengeance is retaliatory punishment for wrong done. The second point is the Ninevites’ guilt. God’s wrath is not capricious, but He will take vengeance. Nineveh was guilty. We must recognize that Nahum’s words apply to us and our sins, too. We need only think here of Paul’s condemnation of the entire human race in Romans (Rom. 3:10-18). God’s wrath is poured out against the guilty. How then shall we escape? We shall not, unless we flee to Christ. The third point of Nahum’s opening verses is the certainty of God’s judgment.

There are three reasons why God was going to destroy Nineveh, according to this prophecy. The first two reasons are in 1:2-6. First, God is a jealous God; and second, He is an avenging God. The prophet gives another reason in the second half of the chapter (1:7-14); **God’s goodness to His people.** Martin Luther called verse 7 (“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble”) “an outstanding statement, overflowing with consolation. We must relate and apply it not merely to that trial of Judah but to absolutely every day of our trials and adversities.”

Introduction

So, the judgment on God’s enemies brings hope to God’s people. We will see that same theme today as we continue our study of Nahum chapter 2. [Note: in the Hebrew Bible, 1:15 begins chapter 2 and all verses are one number greater, i.e., 2:1-14.] **Our study starts out with a grand declaration of good news, glad tidings, peace.** This is the *gospel* message: the enemy of God has been defeated – Belial has been cut off. **Following this message of good news, we have a poetic “movie” describing the destruction of Nineveh.**

To vivify his message, the prophet plunges his reader into the midst of the struggle between Nineveh and its prophesied assailants. Nahum has done all mankind a noble service through his vivid depiction of the outpouring of the wrath of God on the city of Nineveh. By this very concrete, physical portrayal of the event, he has come closest to that consummate description of divine judgment reserved for the lips of Our Lord alone (Mt. 13:40-42, 48-49). A world so accustomed to gratifying the desires of the flesh should take heed to this most vivid of warnings before it is too late.

Exposition

II. Dramatic Depiction of Nineveh's Judgment (1:15-2:13)

Introduction: The Announcement of Accomplished Judgment Means Joyful News for Judah (1:15)

*15 Behold! On the mountain!
The feet of
the one who brings glad tidings,
the one who publishes peace.
Celebrate your festivals,
O Judah!
Fulfill your vows!*

*For never again will Belial
pass through you;
he is altogether cut off.*

15. In a statement strongly resembling **the Messianic passage in Is. 52:7** (cp. Is. 40:9), Judah's attention is directed to the news of *peace* and well-being proclaimed by a **"herald"** (**Gk., "evangelist"**) as one who brings welcome *news*. This news arises from the **downfall of her oppressor, designated as "Belial."** Instead of terror, Judah will now be able to fulfill her religious obligations.

The *mountains* which provide the exalted platform for this herald of good news most probably are the mountains for Judah. This messenger has witnessed the fall of Nineveh and rushes to proclaim the joyful word. No longer will Judah's oppressors torment them. The first phrase of this verse is essentially a verbatim quotation of Is. 52:7, the only difference being that Isaiah reads "*How beautiful are the feet ...*" rather than "*Behold the feet ...*" Perhaps Nahum's setting of a messenger rushing from the gore of battle restrained him from alluding to the "beauty" of these feet.

By a quotation of these very words, **the new covenant believer also is summoned to enter this celebration of salvation (Rom. 10:14-15)**. It is true that Paul uses Isaiah's "*How beautiful are the feet ...*" rather than Nahum's "*Behold the feet ...*" But the substance of the quotation is the same, one prophet giving expression to the positive side of deliverance, and one emphasizing the negative side. This balance of perspectives is vital for a proper appreciation of the ministry of the prophets, since **the salvation of God's people is announced regularly in association with the destruction of God's enemies**.

In Isaiah this seems to be a prophecy of the arrival and reign of the Messiah. The apostle Paul interpreted the passage that way in Romans 10:15. But in Nahum it refers to the announced fall of Nineveh. Just as Isaiah saw the prophesied release of the people of God from their Babylonian captivity to be a token of that final and perfect release from sin and its bondage through Christ, so does **Nahum see the fall of Assyria's capital as a promise of the ultimate defeat of all wickedness by the triumph of Christ**.

So this message of Nahum is a glorious one! Deliverance shall come from the oppressor of God's people by the sovereign intervention of God, even though the sin of God's people had brought them into their calamitous state. How glorious will be that coming deliverance.

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Because of the broader redemptive-historical structures of Scripture, **this deliverance from Assyria's oppression may be perceived as a microcosmic depiction of deliverance from all the oppression that comes as a consequence of sin, Satan, and death.** Nahum applies Isaiah's precise words about deliverance from Babylon to Assyria's defeat as a way of calling attention to the connection which really subsists between the two events, as in essence really one. Paul repeats this same language in Rom. 10:17, and so intimates an innate oneness between the message which announced the fall of those great persecuting powers, and the erection of that Kingdom which was finally to supplant them.

The glorious announcement of Nineveh's fall and the consequent liberation of Judah lead the prophet to summon God's people to *celebration* and *consecration*. It is the *festivals* and *vows* ordained by divine direction that provide the structured framework for long-term jubilant living. They respond to redemption by renewed consecration to the Lord.

Never again shall *Belial* pass through their land, for he is totally *cut off*. The tyrannical tool of Satan situated on Assyria's throne never shall be seen again.

The Christian gospel provides the fullest possible framework for permanent celebration of victory. Death has lost its sting. Celebration by keeping the vows of the Christian life is always in order.

The good news of the defeat of God's enemies is now pictured from the Ninevite point of view, and it is certainly not good news for them! In graphic language and word pictures, Nahum describes the fall of Nineveh. We will consider three main headings on this subject. We will look as the city is: 1) taken; 2) plundered; and 3) humbled. Thus it is with all of God's enemies.

A. The City Is Taken (2:1-7)

1. Announcement of the Coming Siege (2:1-2)

1 *One who scatters has come up against you.*

Guard the fortress!

Watch the way!

Strengthen your loins!

Muster together all your might!

2 *For Yahweh has returned the eminence of Jacob*

as the (ancient) eminence of Israel;

for the emptiers (once) emptied them;

evacuators evacuated,

and they destroyed everyone of their tender sprouts.

1. The four rapid-fire imperatives (*Guard! Watch! Strengthen! Muster!*) challenge the Ninevites to be alert and throw all their strength into their defense. The last two verbs in this series are the very same words rendered **"be strong and courageous"** in Dt. 31:6, 7, 23 and Joshua 1:6, 7, 9, 18; 10:25. It is as though God was saying, "When I said to the Israelites, 'Be strong and courageous,' the secret behind their strength was I, Myself, the Almighty Lord. But when you, Nineveh, are exhorted to "Brace yourselves and marshal all your strength!" you only have your feeble gods to rely on. Whatever do you hope to achieve against such a God who is great in strength?"

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

2. Satan's method may be to subvert by striking at the heel. But the seed of the woman, raised up by God, strikes the deathblow at the head. The reason for this divinely engineered devastation is found in Assyria's previous devastation of Israel. Nineveh had *emptied* or *evacuated* Israel of every remnant of glory. Nineveh shall experience a similar fate.

What is the *eminence of Israel* in Nahum 2:2? The people would have understood God to have meant that the **temple at Jerusalem would once again be revitalized**. Over the years they had seen this symbol of God's presence beginning to fade and decay. Now, through His prophet, the Lord Himself declared that the "splendor of Israel" would once again be seen in the land. However, what these people did not know was that before these words of Nahum could be fulfilled their beloved temple would be completely laid waste by King Nebuchadnezzar and his invading army. Even though the temple of Zerubbabel was rebuilt, and beautified by Herod the Great, it was finally destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Does this mean that Nahum's prophecy was only partly fulfilled? Not at all. **Today we can see something of the glory of Israel as we look at the redeemed people of God**. That is where we see the splendor of the true temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

The New Testament interprets a similar passage in Amos 9:11-12 to indicate the inclusion of the Gentiles within the people of God as being its fulfillment (Acts 15:13-19). So also the present passage could see its fruition in the church as the reunited nation of Israel.⁷

2. Approach of the Assaulters (2:3-4)

- 3 a *The shields of his mighty men*
 - b *are red;*
 - a *men of strength*
 - b *are scarlet clad.*
 - a *Flashing with metal*
 - b *is the chariot*
 - c *in his day of readiness;*
 - a *they brandish*
 - b *cypress spears.*
- 4 a *In the streets*
 - b *the chariots race madly;*
 - b *they rush*
 - a *in the broad places.*
 - a *Their appearance*
 - b *(is) like torches;*
 - b *like lightning*
 - a *they run about.*

"Total domination of the terrain" may be a phrase that captures the impact of this description of the approach of Nineveh's assaulters. They do not draw near the city as a disorganized mass incapable of coordination. Instead, they display total utilization of the most modern, most sophisticated strategies of warfare.

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

3. The color of the *red shields* most likely comes from the blood of the resistance offered by Nineveh. Fuller concentration is placed on the fearsome *chariot* of the invaders, which seem almost impossible to repulse.

4. Where is it that these vehicles of devastation are rushing about like flashes of lightning? The breach of the wall has not yet occurred, so they are not careening about inside the city. They have laid claim to all the territory immediately outside the city walls. Suburban roadways and intersections crisscrossing on the way to the various gates of the city are fully under occupation now. The last resistance has retreated behind the safety of the city's walls, and the fearful chariotry of the enemy rushes about securing every possible escape route.

3. Resistance of the Inhabitants (2:5)

5 *He remembers*
 his noble ones!
 They stumble
 in their going;
 they hasten
 to her wall;
 but the (siege) covering
 is prepared.

5. Up to this point, the description has concentrated on the approaching adversary. But now an image of the panicked Ninevites is provided in a quick flash. The king of the city (*he who remembers his noble ones*) calls for his brave defenders, charging them to confront the foe. With a double stroke of irony, Nahum depicts this mighty monarch who stares blankly at the progressing assault on his city and suddenly *remembers* he has these fine, *noble* soldiers to defend him. But the defenders are hardly adequate to the challenge. *They stumble* to their places of defense at the wall of the city. Then they discover that they are too late to repel those erecting the siege equipment. Already the *(siege) covering* is in place, and the incessant pounding of the walls of the city begins.

How shall people protect themselves against the Almighty when He rises up against them? How much more sure is the fact that God has appointed a Day in which He shall judge people by Jesus Christ the resurrected one? No one shall escape the divine scrutiny associated with that Day.

4. Entry Is Gained (2:6)

6 *a The gates of the rivers,*
 b are opened,
 a and the temple
 b is melted.

6. Likely the *gates of the rivers* refer to the sluices which first would have been closed by the invaders and then opened so as to flood the wall of the city breaking it through. In the actual fall of Nineveh a series of heavy rains swelled the Tigris, flooded parts of the city, and overthrew the way for a length of about two miles. **This ties in exactly with what Nahum prophesied in 1:8.**

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

5. The City Falls (2:7)

7 *It is settled!*
She is stripped!
She is carried away!
And her handmaids-
moaning as the voice of doves
smiting on their breasts.

7. The destruction of Nineveh is *settled* by the Almighty, and so can be announced with the imaginative gusto displayed by this appointed prophet. **So it is. And so it shall ever be with all God's enemies.**

B. The City Is Plundered (2:8-10)

8 *Ninevah has been as a pool of water*
from her (ancient) days.
Yet they are fleeing!
“Stand! Stand!”
But none even turns to look.

9 a *Plunder*
b the silver!
a *Plunder*
b the gold!
For there is no end
of the treasure,
rich
with every vessel of desire.

10 *Destruction, devastation, decimation!*
a *And the heart*
b melts;
b totter
a *the knees.*

a *Convulsion*
b in all the loins;
b and all their faces
a *have gathered paleness.*

The prophet continues his vivid depiction of the coming destruction of Nineveh. The besiegers have been seen from afar. They have advanced to the wall, where the terrified inhabitants have mustered a pitiful resistance. The wall has been broken through, and the city has been claimed. **Now the scene moves into the confines of the city itself.**

8. The imagery of an ancient flourishing pool fits well with the circumstance of the city of Nineveh. Throughout The ages it had made full use of its natural habitat, which makes its disappearance from the face of the earth even more remarkable. Now that **the wall has been**

broken through, the inhabitants panic. The rout is total. Justice prevails. Those who made themselves wealthy by terrifying others now find themselves impoverished and in terror.

9. The kings Assyria boasted repeatedly in their annals of the massive treasures they had collected in their robbing of other nations. The mention of every *vessel of desire* anticipates subsequent prophetic reference to the day in which the “desire of all nations” would flow to the Lord Himself (Hag. 2:7). It is an impressive confirmation of this prophecy that nothing of all the gold and silver that was in Nineveh has been discovered in the ruins of the city by archaeologists. **Nineveh was indeed stripped bare.**

10. *Destruction, devastation decimation!* **The play on words is obvious in the original language**, and effectively conveys the pounding rhythm of devastation accomplished by the invasion. Each successive word is slightly longer than the former, so that a **rhythmic buildup reinforces the message**. The human reaction to all this devastation is predictable. In spirit and in body, the fearsomeness of the events paralyzes the Ninevites. The *heart melts, knees totter, loins convulse, and faces pale*. The picture pulsates with the reality of the situation. **Terror reigns on every side**. They who for generations have made a way of life out of striking fear in the hearts of others now know firsthand the horrors of divine judgment.

C. The City Is Humbled (2:11-13)

1. A Mockery Song of the City (2:11)

- 11 *O where now (is)*
 - a *the lair*
 - b *of the lions,*
 - a *and that which was the feeding place*
 - b *of the young lions?*
 - a *That place where*
 - b *the lion and the lioness strode-*
 - b *the lion's whelp*
 - c *and none could make afraid?*

11. The material in this last section is presented under the **imagery of a lair of ferocious lions**. The lion's den obviously is the unifying imagery of the verse. Nineveh once had been the inviolable sanctuary of conquering kings, proud queens, and offspring of nobility. **The kings of Nineveh often presented themselves in their annals in terms reflecting the behavior of the lion**. The prophet employs a variety of terms for different kinds of lions: the full-grown male lion, the lioness, the young lion large enough to seek his own prey, and the lion's whelp. The whole species manifests the same kind of brute force in the devouring of its prey. Kings, queens, and princes of Nineveh manifest these beastly traits. **The mocking *O where now...* indicates the end of an era.**

2. The Brutality of the City (2:12)

- 12 *The lion*
 - a *was tearing enough*
 - b *for his whelps,*
 - a *and was strangling*
 - b *for his lionesses.*

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

So he filled
a *with shreds,*
b *his caves,*
b *and his lairs*
a *with strips.*

12. Two elements of the lion's behavior stand out in this verse: the brutality of his predatory ways and his instinct to provide for his clan, without concern for the feelings of his victims. How could a human being, made to reflect the compassion of the Creator, sink to such levels of bestiality?

3. *The Lord Speaks Against the City (2:13)*

13 *"Behold Me! I am against you!"*
is the pronouncement of Yahweh of hosts.
a *"So I will burn up*
b *in smoke*
c *her chariots.*
a *So the sword shall devour*
c *your young lions.*
a *So I will cut off*
b *from the earth*
c *your prey;*
and never shall be heard again
the voice of your messengers."

13. Up to this point, the prophet has served as spokesman for the Lord. But now the Lord Himself steps forward to reinforce His own determination. The outcome of this confrontation between Yahweh of hosts and the king of Nineveh already is determined by the simple allusion to the fact that Yahweh stands at the head of the heavenly *hosts*.

The silencing of the voice of Nineveh's messengers echoes the opening statement of this chapter (1:15). The messengers of peace declare on the mountains the word of the destruction of Judah's oppressor. These bearers of glad tidings have replaced altogether the emissaries of Assyria that had tormented Israel with their arrogant words of defiance. Remember how Rabshakeh, sent by Sennacherib, mocked Jerusalem with his taunts in the days of Hezekiah (cf. 2 Kgs 18:17ff.)? **Never again shall these messengers speak their oppressive, boastful words. Instead, the beautiful feet of the messengers sent from God shall declare peace, prosperity, and safety for the Lord's people.** All of these blessings come in conjunction with the destruction of God's enemies.

The metaphor is mixed between the lions whose "cubs" are destroyed and whose *prey* is "cut off," and the earlier battle scene (vv. 3-10) of the burning of chariotry and the silencing of the military *messengers* in the destruction. This verse thus structurally unites the chapter and brings it to a conclusion.

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Conclusion

There are two sides to the Day of the Lord – the day when the Lord comes. **He comes in both judgment and blessing.** We see the judgment side most clearly in Nahum through the judgment on Nineveh. But we need to realize that God is not only speaking to Ninevites here in Nahum. **He is speaking to all the enemies of God, throughout the ages.** He is speaking to everyone who will not bend the knee to Jesus Christ. And to those enemies He says in 2:13, “Behold, I am against you!”

It is terrible to have the great God of the universe say, “I am against you.” If God says that to you, you should know that it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of such an angry God. God records these judgments against Nineveh to show us that He is a God of judgment as well as of love and that judgment upon the wicked will surely come. The Judge of all the earth does right. If you have gone your way, spurned God’s law, sought out your own corrupt devices—justice demands your eternal condemnation. God must and will judge you. In terms of that great judgment, which is hell, the fall of Nineveh is almost insignificant. **Yet God tells you this so you might turn from your sin and seek His face at the cross of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.** It is only as we stand beneath the cross that we are protected from that greatest of all judgments, which is yet to come.

And so we see that there is another side of the Day of the Lord, the day of the Lord’s coming. The other side of judgment on God’s enemies is blessings on God’s people. We can see this most clearly in Nahum 1:15 and 2:2.

Paul takes up the language of Nahum 1:15 in Romans 10:15 where he says, “It is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” Here the messenger is a preacher who brings good news, and this news is called “**the gospel**” (meaning “**good news**”). It tells of deliverance from sin through the victory won through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. And these same blessings flowing from Christ’s death are available for all who will come to Him in repentance and faith.

Nahum also sees a day in 2:2 when the *eminence of Israel* will be restored. This prophecy was partly fulfilled by the restoration of the Temple after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. However, the ultimate fulfillment is not in buildings, but in God’s people. **Today we can see something of the glory of Israel as we look at the redeemed people of God.** That is where we see the splendor of the true temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

There is a message here for us today. It may sometimes seem that everyone is working against us. We may feel in utter despair because of the strength and intensity of our enemies, yet we need to remember that the Lord has promised to restore the splendor of His people (2:2); He has promised to be a refuge for us in times of trouble (1:7). It is not the enemy of God’s people who will triumph in the end. It is the Lord who will win the victory. Sometimes He even uses ungodly people to bring about His purposes. This is the message for us all. **Remember that the salvation of God’s people and blessings upon them come with the destruction of God’s enemies.**

Next week: Lesson 5 – Nahum 3 – “Your Injury Has No Healing”

Close in Prayer.