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Nahum 1:1-8

“The Anger of God”

July 31, 2005

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The Creator of the universe cares about you personally. Have you ever let that sink in? Have you ever thought through all the ramifications of that truth? One of the things we at Dexter Methodist Church say is “There’s a place in God’s heart only you can fill.” If God loves you and me so much that there is a place in God’s heart that only you can fill, doesn’t it make sense that there is a place in God’s heart only you can hurt? You are the one who can equally hurt God when you turn aside from Him, when you treat Him like He doesn’t exist. Doesn’t it make sense that God can be jealous of the other “god” in your life because He loves you so much? Whether the other god you worship is your work, your schedule, your image, the god of comfort, the internet, some person, or selfishness, doesn’t it make sense that the immortal, invisible, awesome God will punish His enemies who seek to thwart Him from being able to love every person He’s created? Doesn’t it make sense that God would become angry when those He loved enough to send His only Son for hurt one another and even themselves?

This idea is where Nahum was coming from as he prophesied against the Ninevites. The book of Nahum is one that is neglected because it is so obscure, and so small that it is seldom read and much less frequently understood. But every portion of scripture is indispensable; each has its own contribution to make. And this little prophecy of Nahum is no exception. Hear these words of Nahum 1:1-8: *“An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite. 2 The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. 3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. 4 He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. 5 The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. 6 Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him. 7 The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, 8 but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness.”*

The attribute which the prophet Nahum was given to reveal was God's anger. Woo-hoo... “Honey, let’s get the kids up and go to church. It’s a beautiful day, and it’s been awhile since I’ve heard a good sermon on God’s anger!” As the preacher, I admit I get a little nervous. There is no doctrine quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger of God. This is one characteristic I would like to forget. But I can’t, because it’s there. There are some who picture God as a kindly gentleman with a merry twinkle in his eye who cannot bear the thought of punishing anyone or judging anyone beyond giving them a lump of coal. Nevertheless, it was Nahum's task to unfold the anger of God and in this prophecy the God of Sinai flashes forth in awful fury, a God before whom humanity must stand silent and trembling. You cannot read this prophecy without sensing something of the solemnity and intensity of this tremendous picture of God.

As we begin this book it is important to know why and at whom God is so angry. This prophecy is directed against the city of Nineveh. Remember Nineveh? It’s where God sent Jonah to preach. When Jonah preached in Nineveh, the city repented in sackcloth and ashes. God's anger was withheld from the city and he spared it, because they turned to God and repented of their sins, from the king on down to the lowest citizen.

The book of Nahum comes about one hundred years after the prophecy of Jonah. After the revival of Jonah's time, Nineveh stopped its repentance, and had begun to do the same things that called forth the threat of judgment through the prophet Jonah. (I'm sure it happened slowly. Little compromises here, little sins there. People don't just say "I'm going to turn to drugs, crime, rape, or murder." They just slowly sell out. Over the 100 years since the revival of Jonah, they slowly start to live more and more selfishly. And when it becomes extremely evident is from one generation to the next.) It is now to the point that God gives Nahum a vision of his wrath for Nineveh.

This is one of those parts of prophecy in Scripture which already has been fulfilled. Much of Scripture remains to be fulfilled, and many of the predictions of the Old Testament prophets look beyond our own day to a time when the Lord will come again. But as we look at this book, we see several prophecies that have long since come to pass. This is one of the great proofs that the Book of God is from God, for there is a description here of exactly how this destruction of Nineveh would occur, years before it took place.

We can divide the book of Nahum into four sections, and each of them is a description of the anger of God. The first section powerfully pictures the wrath of God. 1:2-3 *"The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies. 3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet."*

What a description! The clouds themselves are but the dust of his feet. The prophet sees God in his anger looking at the hosts of Assyria, as they surround and torment the Jews. Anger is such a strange thing: it's an emotion, but it can also be sin, when we hang on to it or when we don't confront the situation causing us to be angry or when we get angry over the wrong things. One common way we sinfully deal with anger is we triangulate. Someone makes me angry, but instead of confronting that person I go talk to another friend, and we never get to the issue. There are some men and women who live in a perpetual anger. Their tempers boil over at the slightest things. It's like they hang on to their pain in order to fuel their lives. But the interesting thing is that people don't usually fear this kind of a person. They pity them, or they make jokes about them, or just plain avoid them.

That is not the picture that the prophet gives here, of an infinitely patient God. Nahum says, *"He is slow to anger."* He has given this city chance after chance to repent. They did believe one prophet and repented their evil ways, but then *they repented from their repentance*. That is one of the most terrible things that people can do. Having turned from their evil, they went back to what they had said they would forsake, and this is what evokes the judgment of God at last. They began celebrating their sinful, sensual ways, as Paul says to the Philippians, 3:18-19 *"many today walk, ... whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things."* (Sounds like cable TV today!)

God is angry, and this is no temper tantrum. There is nothing impulsive about the anger of God. There is nothing selfish about it. It is a controlled but terrible rage, fearsome to behold. You can get some idea of the awfulness of this divine anger in the fact that all the Hebrew words for wrath or anger are brought together in these six verses. The words are: jealous, vengeance, wrath, anger, indignation, fierceness, fury. All of them describe the anger of God.

Jealousy is that burning zeal for a deep-felt cause. This is not the selfish, petty jealousy we exhibit sometimes, but God's overwhelming concern for what he loves. His vengeance, or retribution; his wrath, that towering anger, the blackness of it, the darkness of it, is described here. The word for anger is the word that literally means "heavy breathing," or "hot breathing." And the word for indignation literally means "foaming at the mouth"! The word fierceness in Hebrew literally means "heat," and the word fury means "burning." And all this to describe a God who is terrible in his wrath, moved at last to the point of white-hot passion, burning with a terrible, blistering rage. This too is God. (word study by Ray Stedman) Let me ask you: Do you love anything enough to *feel* like that? If so, are you angry over the right things? Do you express your anger in the right ways (by confronting it?)

In the next part of the prophecy, Nahum speaks of God's anger toward one person: Sennacherib, the general of the Assyrian armies. Even as God's *love* can be directed toward one person, so can God's wrath. This is what people are slow to believe. They say that "God is a God of love. How can he possibly punish anybody?" When it is mentioned that God's justice demands that He punish us, they say it's old thinking. God's love is greater than his justice, and

therefore, under no circumstances can God's justice cause him to punish. But that view of God belittles God's view of sin. We treat sin quite casually. God's holiness demands more. After all, God's justice is the whole reason Jesus died on the cross.

Chapter 2 begins the third portion of Nahum's prophecy—the destruction of Nineveh. Nahum predicts how the Babylonians will come upon Nineveh. Verse 2:6 is an amazing direct prophecy of how it would happen: The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus records "There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken till the river become an enemy with the city. And in the third year of the siege, the river being swollen with continual rains overflowed every part of the city and broke down the wall for twenty furlongs. Then the king [of Nineveh] thinking that the oracle was fulfilled...collected together all his wealth and his concubines and his eunuch, burnt himself and the palace with them all. (Ray Stedman) Nahum 2:6 says "*The gates of the rivers are opened and the palace is dissolved.*"

That is how thoroughly God's anger works when it begins to move in judgment. He is, after all, the God of the universe. Remember the first sentence of *The Purpose Driven Life*? "It's not about you." It's about God, who created the universe. Nothing escapes. When God moves, nothing escapes His grasp. Nothing. We are in His universe. There is no way to run away, no place to hide. We must deal with a God who says over and over again that if His grace is thwarted, He will rise in judgment at the last.

Chapter 3 of Nahum reveals how irresistible God's anger is. The reasons are referenced, such as harlotry (basically the selling of women for sex), messing with charms, and pride. In 3:5 God gives His response: "*I will lift up your skirts over your face, And show to the nations your nakedness, And to the kingdoms your disgrace*". I can't help but think today how much in *our* nation we mess with harlotry, charms, and pride—whether virtually on the computer, over the cable, or in real life. Later in chapter 3, God reminds them how even impregnable cities like Thebes were carried away and destroyed in their pride. God controls history and there is no escape, for nations or you and me.

God's message for you and me today may be this: If you think that God is only a God of love and never of wrath, learn from Nahum that a God who is never angry is a God who *cannot* love. God's wrath *comes* from his love. It is because God loves us so much that He is angry. God is angry with his people—when they forsake his covenant and break the Law that He gave them to help them, only because God cares SO DEEPLY for us. He is literally disturbed when people are oppressed, or when sin leads them away from Him and the life He desires for them.

What moves you to anger? Isn't it when something you love gets threatened or injured or treated unjustly? If you didn't care, you wouldn't get upset. If oppression or harm comes to people and you feel no anger, there is something wrong with you. Your love has become extremely distorted by sin. Now, sometimes we become angry because we love the wrong things (like things!). We use people and love things, rather than loving people and using things. We get inconvenienced, or something happens to something we have no business caring so much for. Sometimes we are distorted by sin because we don't put our angry responses and reactions under Christ's authority, and we blow up inappropriately. But, there are some very good times for us to feel anger, especially as believers. Christians are not supposed to be pansies, or "nice" guys, or doormats all the time. Hatred, oppression, killing of innocents, poverty, and other things which de-humanize God's good creation ought to provoke us to God-like anger, for the right things and the right reasons. And when we feel anger, we are to confront the situation in a godly way.

We like to say God loves the sinner but hates the sin, but that is only part of the story. The Bible tells us that if a man loves his sin and holds on to it at all costs, refusing the grace of God, then he becomes identified with his sin. (We do this ourselves. I say "It's just a part of who I am", when in reality it's just an excuse for the sin I've grown to love. I think it's just part of me, so I don't have to bring it under Christ's authority.) And eventually, the wrath of God against the sin is also directed against the sinner. We become identified with what we cling to.

Remember: being a God of love does not mean being a God of permissiveness. God will *not* let you do anything and get away with it. As Spurgeon said, "He who does not believe that God will punish sin, will not believe that he will pardon it through the blood of his Son."

Now hear the Good News in Nahum. It's there, although it's brief. *The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him*" (Nahum 1:7) No one who turns to God will ever experience his wrath. This complaint that God is a God of wrath seems to picture him as being vengeful without reason, as being determined upon the destruction of people, but it is never so. We need not face the wrath of this holy God. No one needs to. That's why we share the faith with everyone. God's whole purpose has been to call us to that way so that they might take it. And that way is given here: "*God knows those who take refuge in him.*"

God knows those who take refuge in Him and His heart of love is always open to them. They will never know his wrath. That is what the Scriptures say. As the Lord Jesus put it, "*He who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*" (John. 5:24). Someone had to bear the wrath of God. Because of His great love, God sent Jesus to bear not just the sins of the world, but the wrath of God as well. The judgment was already passed to Jesus when you and I put our faith and trust in Jesus and His sacrifice for us.