

Warnings to Nineveh and Judah
Nahum and Zephaniah
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Today's lesson covered the prophesies of Nahum and Zephaniah. Both were contemporaries who presented the word of the Lord during Josiah's reign. However, Nahum may have been alive during Hezekiah's life and Zephaniah was a great-grandson of king Hezekiah. Both delivered messages of God's judgment. Nahum prophesied against Nineveh representing the nation of Assyria. Zephaniah warned Judah of their imminent fall to exile due to their sins that were paralleled in the evil nations around them.

Back in lesson 13 we studied the prophet, Jonah. He served the Lord during the reign of Jeroboam II. God called him to warn the people of Nineveh; "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up to me." [Jonah 1:1] Remember the result of his prophecy? In Jonah 3:5,10 it is recorded: "The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth....When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened." God allowed knowledge of Him to set Assyria into His time-table, rather than their own.

Approximately 70 years later, Assyria had become a strong and savage empire, which God allowed to carry away the Northern ten tribes of Israel into

captivity. They were working on God's time-table in doing so. But they demonstrated a viciousness and barbarism against conquered nations, which God condemned. Their practice of displacing the population of their captives would lead to their undoing. Then, a little over 20 years after that, Sennacherib laid siege against Jerusalem, during Hezekiah's reign.

Assyria then faced God's wrath, instead of His sanction. In response to Hezekiah's prayer over Sennacherib's slanderous letter against God, Isaiah prophesied of Assyria's defeat in Isaiah chapter 37. Verses 34 & 35 revealed: "Therefore this is what the Lord says concerning the king of Assyria: 'By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city,' declares the Lord. 'I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!'" And we learned how God sent his avenging angel to attack their camp, killing all the fighting men and the commanders during one night [2 Chron. 32:20], routing the remaining men to flee back to Nineveh.

It was addressing this incident that the Lord gave Nahum his first prophecy. Remember how terrified the people of Jerusalem were as they witnessed Sennacherib's advance? The powerful Assyrian army mowed down each fortified city and surrounded Jerusalem. To peer over the wall at such a formidable army had to sow terror in every heart in the city.

But Nahum delivered hope and encouragement, just as Isaiah had!

“Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be destroyed and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, Judah, I will afflict you no more. I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.” [Nahum 1:12,13]

Not only did the Lord God “shoo” away Assyria, he caused turmoil in their leadership so that Jerusalem had a time of peace, and lessening of tribute payments, for awhile.

In verses 1:2&3, Nahum warned Nineveh; “The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm.” Therefore, two important world events, like intense storms, were prophesied next. First the fall of Assyria as a nation, and secondly, through Zephaniah, the fall of Judah.

Nahum revealed that God had no more patience for Assyria. Naming its capital city, Nineveh, in chapter one, he brought his charges. In verse 9 & 10- they have plotted against the Lord, and devised wicked plans. In verse 13- they placed a heavy yoke on Judah and treated them as slaves. They had boasted in their idols and gods in verses 12 &14, and in their own powerful army to attack and pillage Israel. But next, God will turn all their pride and reliance on their own power, into Nineveh's downfall.

The same event that turned Israel to respond in a celebration in verse 15,

would bring terror and despair for Nineveh. “Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, Judah, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed.”

For years Nineveh had played out their aggression on neighboring nations. But now, it would be brought to their own gates. Chapter 2 is an attack on their citadel as if reported in the news headlines! Verse 1: “An attacker advances against Nineveh” Verse 3: “Chariots storm through streets... like flaming torches they dart about like lightning” Verse 5 “Picked Troops ...stumble on their way” Verse 6 “River Gates thrown open and the palace collapses” Verse 7 “Nineveh is exiled and carried away!” Verse 10: “She is pillaged, plundered, stripped!”

But Nahum was not an eye witness to this attack, except in the vision of his prophecy. The end of Nineveh did not come until Cyaxaras, also known as Ahasueras the Mede, and Nabopolassar, predecessor of Nebuchadnezar of Babylonia teamed up to overthrow their Assyrian overlords, about 100 years later. But the emotion expressed in chapter 3 as Nahum pronounced the Lord's woe on Nineveh is only explained in the concept of a vision which is so real, that the prophet enters into the frustration, panic and finality of losing the battle for one's life. Assyria was on the losing side this time.

The Lord made it very clear that there was no longer any hope for Nineveh.

The repentance the people experienced during Jonah's day, is not being offered again. The Lord's proclamation in chapter 3 verse 5 echoes that of chapter 2 verse 13: "I am against you, declares the Lord Almighty." Sennacherib thought that his false gods must be greater than Israel's God. But as they faced the wrath of the Lord Almighty, God of Israel, the rulers of Nineveh were no longer under that false presumption. And Nahum ends his prophecy with the pitiless eulogy: "Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?" [Nahum 3:19]

We, in America have been spared the ordeal of the occupation of an invading army on our shores. But imagine our panic watching the news coverage as city by city our nation was conquered. How could we endure? Where would you turn in times of such intense trouble? Jesus warned his disciples that they would face the fears of being hunted and searching for a safe place to hide. In John 16:11 he encouraged them by saying, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

We can find that same peace when our world seems to be falling apart. Our Lord didn't leave us to face our fears alone. He is with us. He promised never to leave us. He gave us his Word as our guide. Following God's plan gives us courage and a view to our safe haven. Jesus also instructed that we should, "Seek

first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” [Matthew 6:33,34] But Judah would soon discover from God's Word, this world is not our final destination.

Now, in our lesson last week, we saw how Manassah and Amon, his son, again defiled Judah with massive idol worship and followed the evil practices of the nations they had displaced in the Promised Land. They drove Judah down the same road as that of the Northern kingdom, Israel. Josiah succeeded Amon and changed things around. He cleaned up Jerusalem and crushed the foreign idols and their altars and their priests. So, Nahum revealed a few sparkling glimpses of the hope God had for Judah in the middle of his pronouncement of Nineveh's end. Chapter 2, verse 2 said: “The Lord will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines.”

Barnes, in his commentary, made special note about the reference to Jacob's name, rather than that of Judah as they were now known. He said, “Their forefather bore the name of Jacob in his troubled days of exile; that of Israel was given him on his return in Genesis 32:28. It would then mean, the afflicted people (Jacob) shall be restored to its utmost glory as Israel.” They would still receive the punishment of captivity and exile before this promise was to come true, but they

would be restored. The Father's punishment would come, but it would not last forever.

Zephaniah was given the task of warning Judah about this punishment. It would come, just as surely as Nineveh's punishment and that of other evil nations had come. He referred to the prophetic phrase, "the Day of the Lord." This reference is to specific times of punishment from God. It is also referenced by Jesus, who described in Matthew 24 the future destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age. The day described by Zephaniah was when Nebuchadnezer came to lay siege to Jerusalem and finally carried away Judah into captivity.

The Lord warned them, "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests – those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Moleck, those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him." [Zephaniah 1:4-6]

You could almost hear Judah's claps of celebration over Nineveh's fall, turn to murmurs of confusion as Zephaniah's prophecy pauses. God had revealed that His day of judgment was going to fall on evil places like Nineveh! How could he possibly mean to let Judah be destroyed too? But as if to quiet their thoughtless rebuttal, the prophet calls for all sound to cease. "Be silent before the Sovereign

Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited.”

Then, just as Nahum had laid out God's charges against Nineveh, Zephaniah describes the sins of Judah.

Verse 8: The officials and king's sons have adopted even the customs and clothes of the evil countries around them – such as Ahaz in 2 Kings 23:12 had done.

Verse 9: many have copied the superstitions relating to foreign gods – including Moleck and Baal worship.

Verses 10 & 11: The merchants are relying on their silver and gold – rather than relying on God for their help.

Verse 12: The people drifted into apathy concerning the Lord- or blended worship of the Lord with worship of Baal, Asherah, or Moleck at the same time.

Verse 13: The wealthy of Jerusalem think only about gaining more possessions – never even considering that calamity would come!

Now, where one might rationalize some of these sins, saying, “That's not so bad,” consider that each accusation was a result of idolatry. The garments purchased in foreign lands were probably the fancy, embroidered robes used by the priests in the worship of idols or in their festivals. The superstition of leaping over the threshold was first mentioned regarding the priests of Dagon in Philistia, because their idol had fallen down onto the threshold of his temple, when the

Philistines stored the Ark of the Covenant there. Mannasah as well as other kings of Judah, put other idols and their altars into the temple of the Lord. The merchants were dealing with the paraphernalia of idol worship as well as making silver idols to sell, not to mention gleaning the profits of temple prostitution. But the worst consequence of Judah's sin was that they began treating the worship of the Lord of their ancestors as no different than the worship of these false gods. They were so used to this mixed-up, polluted worship that they didn't even see a problem with all of it.

We also must examine our worship. Are we centered on the Lord God or on ourselves when we come to church? Do we participate in actually worshiping Him, or are our minds wandering off during services to the game, entertainment, or chores we have to do afterward? Such worship is diluted with the worries and cares of this world, rather than looking to the Lord God and worshiping Him only.

The wealthy class living in Jerusalem believed that, now that Nineveh was gone, they had nothing to fear. Life would just keep getting better. After all, God was on their side, right? But Zephaniah's description of that day of the Lord's wrath stunned them to silence. Their immediate future was not one of ease, success and good fortune. In verses 11 and 12 of chapter 1 that day is described: "The day will be a day of wrath- a day of anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness- a day of trumpet and battle

cry against fortified cities and against corner towers. I will bring such distress on all people that they will grope about like those who are blind, because they have sinned against the Lord.” Judah would experience exile as God's punishment.

We have seen how the worship of Israel wavered between idol worship and worship of Jehovah. Even though they had mixed it together, God was preparing a sacrifice to offer them an opportunity to repent, just as Nineveh had done through Jonah. He called them together, “Gather together, gather yourselves together, you shameful nation, before the decree takes effect and that day passes like windblown chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's wrath comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger.” [Zephaniah 2:1-3]

God repeatedly sent prophets to warn Israel to turn back to Him. He made it very clear that His wrath would come on their nation too, if they did not repent. God also sent good kings, such as Josiah, who tried to cleanse the nation of their idol worship. But most turned back to the idols again.

Don't we do the same thing. It's not easy to break sinful habits. They become ingrained in our daily practices and passed on to our children. We rationalize that we are not as bad as non believers around us. But we keep returning to those old habits instead of allowing God to sweep them clean, burning

them on the altar and removing all traces of them in our lives. God has been so patient with us. But He will turn to discipline to bring us back to worship only Him. His love and mercy can be found in his discipline too.

And so, Zephaniah communicated God's offer, with the promise of discipline. But he also turned his spotlight onto the examples of God's cleansing going on in the nations where Israel had learned their idolatry. Philistia, Israel's nemesis nation by the sea, was where Judah learned the superstitions about Dagon and the Baals. God said, "I will destroy you, and none will be left." [2:5]

Moab and Ammon, nations descended from Lot, taught Israel sexuality in their idol worship. "Therefore, as surely as I live,' declares the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, 'Surely Moab will become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah -'" [2:9] The cities Lot fled would be the ultimate example for his descendants.

Cush was a generic name for the civilizations of Africa, such as Egypt. How often had Israel turned to Egypt, rather than God for help or safety when famine or swords had threatened them? In Egypt, the children of Israel learned about the Sun god and gods representing nature. God condemned them saying, "You Cushites, too, will be slain by my sword." [2:12]

Assyria so impressed Ahaz that he brought back their idol and star worship to Israel. But God had complete destruction in store for them: "He will stretch our

his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as the desert.” [2:13] The awe inspiring construction and magnificent splendor of Nineveh will be the object of scorn, “She said to herself, 'I am the one! And there is none besides me.' What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts! All who pass by her scoff and shake their fists.” [2:15b]

Therefore, if all these surrounding nations, that had been the examples followed by Israel for their idol worship, were to be destroyed, shouldn't Israel also take notice of their own danger? But they didn't. “Of Jerusalem I thought, 'Surely you will fear me and accept correction!' Then her place of refuge would not be destroyed, nor all my punishments come upon her. But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.” [3:7] God did not delight in all this destruction. But he jealously loved Israel. He wanted their hearts to be devoted to him, not to idols.

But, unlike the rest of the nations who were destroyed and never seen again, God had a future plan for his people. The final half of chapter 3, in Zephaniah's last prophecy, pulled back the curtain of time to promise Israel that this destruction was not permanent. “Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder....On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from you your arrogant boasters. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The

remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord.” [3:9, 11, 12]

God is very different from the idol-gods they had turned to worship. He is the Lord Almighty, a jealous God – but His anger is that of a father, who loves His wayward children. His desire for Israel, and all of humanity has always been to pour out His love on us and have us love Him back. If the only way to purify us, leads through the narrow valley that strips away everything we had attached to our hearts instead of Him, He will lead us there. But be sure that He will not leave us there.

The Word commands Israel to rejoice over such a promise: “Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.” [3:14,15]

We know from history that the nation of Israel would continue to suffer from its enemies, up to this current day. But, never again would God allow any nation to overcome them or pollute their worship and reliance on Him. His plan for them included his Promised One, who would some day walk those streets of Jerusalem, healing the lame, the blind, and redeeming the lost. The Christ would come to be their King, one day. “The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you,

but will rejoice over you with singing.” [3:17]

The Messiah was Israel's hope, as he is ours today. Jesus is his name. Yes we too have troubles around us. Medical problems, financial problems, relational problems, and our fears of those problems, try to push our hearts away from the Lord. But remember, our God is greater than any of those problems. He is our “Mighty Warrior who saves” us. And he is willing to use those problems to shear off our double-mindedness, purify our lips and listen as we once again sing His praises.

Then, “He will rejoice over you with singing.” [3:17]