

1

The Lord's Case against Nineveh

Nahum 1—2

a

The Lord's Anger, Majesty, and Goodness (1:1-8)

**The LORD is good,
a refuge in times of trouble....
with an overwhelming flood
he will make an end of Nineveh.**
—Nahum 1:7a, 8a

The Book of Nahum begins by naming its author, where he was from, and the focus of his vision. Nahum identified himself as the writer and said that he was from a city called Elkosh, the location of which is unknown. We know nothing else about Nahum, except that he wrote this stinging prophecy against the city of Nineveh, which represented the ruthless and evil empire of Assyria (vs. 1). At the same time, his words were comforting for Judah, for at last it would be delivered from its oppressor. In fact, Nahum's name means "consolation" or "full of comfort."

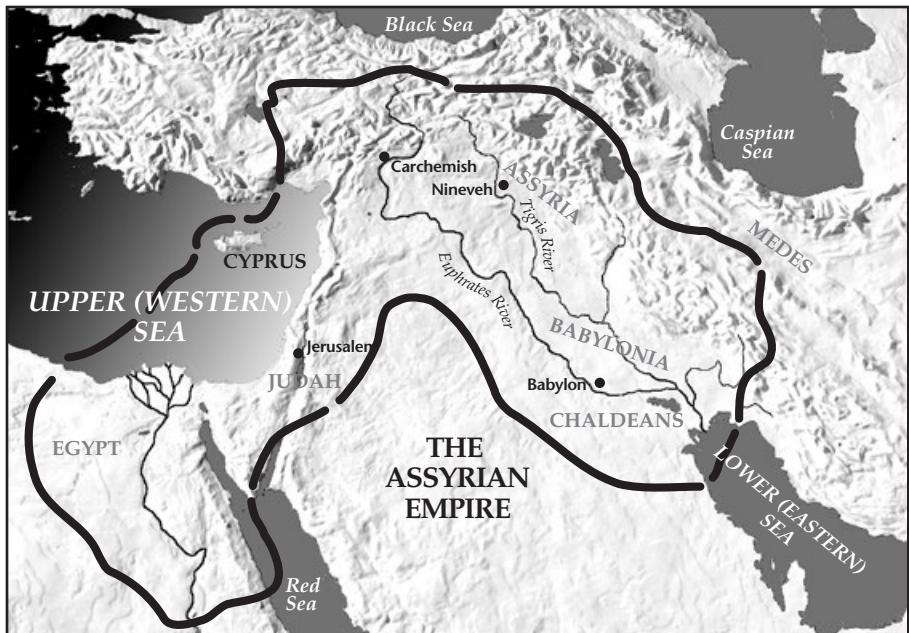
Nahum began his prophecy by describing the Lord as "a jealous and avenging God" (vs. 2). When He entered into a covenantal rela-

tionship with Israel, God described Himself as "jealous," emphasizing His claim on the nation's love and obedience (see Exod. 20:5).

In regard to Nineveh, God's jealousy showed itself in His passion to hold Assyria accountable for its cruelty to other nations, including the northern ten tribes of Israel. Several years earlier, Assyria had taken the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity. Now it posed a threat to Judah. But Nineveh, at the height of its power, faced the anger of God.

The fact that God delays His wrath against wrongdoing does not mean that He is indifferent to the actions of evil people. Although He is slow to anger, He is powerful and will not let the guilty go unpunished (Nah. 1:3a). More than a century earlier, God had demonstrated His patience when Nineveh repented under the preaching of Jonah. But because Assyria returned to its evil and merciless ways, the empire would now feel the hand of God's judgment.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I ever mistake God's slow response to sin as a sign of indifference?



God's majesty and power are depicted by the "whirlwind and the storm, and clouds" (vs. 3b). While these forces of nature seem strong to us, they are dwarfed by the presence of One who is able to accomplish justice upon the earth. God's patience does not mean that He is blind to evil or incapable of responding. We can be sure that He will bring the guilty to justice.

Nineveh used its natural water barrier, the Tigris River, as a defense against enemy attack. Nahum, however, showed that water has never been a hindrance for God's power (vs. 4). When Moses was pinned against the Red Sea by Pharaoh and his army, the Lord made a dry path through the midst of this large body of water (see Exod. 14:21, 22). At God's command even the choicest forest and pasture regions of the promised land, Bashan and Carmel,

felt the effects of the drought He brought upon the land. God's sovereignty over nature extends to the rivers and the rain.

To further illustrate God's might, Nahum proclaimed that "the mountains quake before him" and "the earth trembles at his presence" (Nah. 1:5). If such is the case, then what person or nation could endure His anger? The earth itself is not big or strong enough to thwart God's purposes. Who could hope to oppose Him?

Nahum summed up the matter by asking, "Who can withstand his indignation?" (vs. 6). Since God's anger could not be resisted, Nineveh would fail in its defiance of God and would not survive. The city would soon experience His anger poured out like fire upon it. Fire was a common Old Testament image of God's judgment.

God's anger and retribution do not, however, diminish His kinder characteristics such as His goodness, love, and compassion. Those who turn to the Lord do not have to fear His wrath or His judgment. He cares for His own and provides for their salvation (vs. 7). Through Nahum, God showed His love for His people by winning their freedom from bondage to the oppressive and ungodly Assyrians.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I understand the balance between God's love and His determination to discipline me when I sin?

The prophet Isaiah once used the image of a flood to describe the assault of Assyria on the northern kingdom of Israel (see Isa. 8:7, 8). Now Nineveh would experience its own "overwhelming flood," which would bring it to a devastating end (Nah. 1:8). Indeed, after Nineveh was destroyed, this city was never inhabited again.



Relief for Judah (1:9-15)

**Celebrate your festivals, Judah,
and fulfill your vows.**

**No more will the wicked invade
you;
they will be completely
destroyed.**

—Nahum 1:15b

Nahum assured Judah that whatever else Nineveh plotted against the Lord, He would bring it to an end; God would not permit the Assyrians to trouble His people anymore (vs. 9). This probably meant that the Lord would not let the Assyrians do to Judah what they had done to the northern ten tribes of Israel. God would bring an end to Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire before that would happen.

The prophet's message about the apparently invincible Assyrians may

Nineveh's Watery Grave

Nahum prophesied that the Lord would use an overwhelming flood to bring an end to Nineveh (Nah. 1:8). The ancient Greek historian Ctesias related that during a drunken feast in Nineveh, "the floodgates of the city were swept away by a sudden overflowing of the Tigris River which washed away the foundations of the palace."

The Babylonian armies, which were besieging the city, entered through the breach caused by the flood and burned the city to the ground.

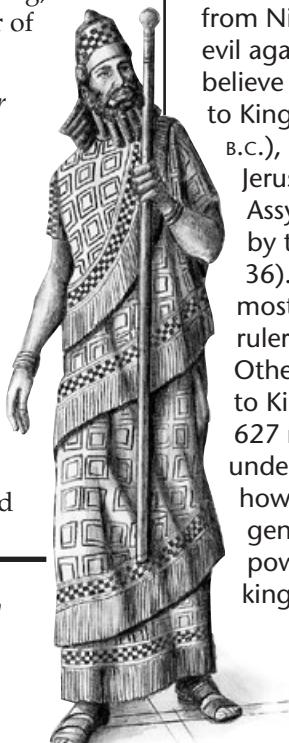
have seemed like fanciful thinking to the people of Judah who were their subjects. But in God's eyes, the Assyrians were already "entangled among thorns and drunk" and about to be consumed like dry stubble (vs. 10). The mighty Ninevites would be helpless before the judgment of God, which would sweep over them like fire over dry grass.

It helps to remember that God is able to do what seems impossible and improbable to us. Who would have thought that the Soviet Union would crumble so quickly? There might even be a powerful person in our lives, either at work or in our families, who seems to have an oppressive hold over us. God has promised deliverance to all who remain faithful to Him. Human might, no matter how strong, is no match for the power of God.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I ever doubt God's ability to overcome the apparently impossible difficulties in my life?*

Nahum 1:11 refers to one who had come forth from Nineveh plotting evil against the Lord. This shows the total wickedness that dominated the leadership of Nineveh during this time. They were not afraid

An Assyrian ruler, based upon an Assyrian relief sculpture.



to openly challenge the Lord with their evil plans and purposes.

In response to Nineveh's schemes, God would show His might by destroying the city while it was still at the peak of its power (vs. 12). Ashurbanipal, the last significant Assyrian king, would elaborately describe his bloody conquests and the growth of his empire—up until the last 20 years of his reign. During that period, Assyria went from its peak as a superpower to relative obscurity. The fall of Nineveh in 612

The One Who Plots **EVIL**

In verse 11 of chapter 1, Nahum referred to someone from Nineveh who "plots evil against the Lord." Some believe that this is a reference to King Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.), who led the siege on Jerusalem in which 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were killed by the Lord (II Kings 19:35, 36). He stands out as the most powerful Assyrian ruler to come against Judah. Others believe it is a reference to King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.), who subdued Judah under King Manasseh. Others, however, consider this a general reference to the evil power behind the Assyrian kings.

This relief shows Jehu, the king of Judah, kneeling before King Shalmaneser III, a ruthless Assyrian ruler.

B.C. brought a decisive end to this evil kingdom.

For the people of Judah, the fall of Assyria would bring an end to the affliction God had allowed this empire to place upon them. The tables would be turned. They would be freed from bondage, while the Ninevites would experience adversity (vs. 13).

In the days of Nahum, a “command” (vs. 14) constituted a formal pronouncement. Once it had gone out to the people, it could not be taken back or altered. The fate of the Assyrians was sealed by the Word of God. He would not fail to do what He had promised.

The destruction of the leadership in Nineveh was to be accompanied by the elimination of their idolatry. The Assyrian kings ruled by the apparent favor of their gods and credited these gods for their many victories. It was essential that the gods and temples be demolished along with the kings to demonstrate the futility of idolatry.

The news of the demise of these kings brought rejoicing to the people of Judah, who had been oppressed by their reigns of terror. The good news of peace meant that Judah could celebrate its feasts without fear of interference from Assyria. The kings of Nineveh would never invade the land of Judah again.



C

The Attack on Nineveh (2:1-10)

**An attacker advances against you,
Nineveh.
Guard the fortress,
watch the road,
brace yourselves,
marshal all your strength!**

—Nahum 2:1

In chapter 2, Nahum moved from a pronouncement of judgment to a description of the impending attack upon Nineveh. We know from history that this was carried out by an alliance of the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians around 614–612 B.C. Cyarxes the Mede attacked Nineveh in 614 B.C., but was unable to take the city. Cyarxes was joined by Nabopolasor of Babylonia and Umman Manda, ruler of the Scythians, in 612 B.C. and wiped out the city and its inhabitants.

Mockingly, the prophet called

upon the Assyrians to take action and prepare for the oncoming assault (vs. 1). Because God had commanded Nineveh's destruction, every action to defend the city would be in vain.

In the midst of describing the attack, Nahum again stopped to remind Judah of God's promise to "restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel" (vs. 2). The references to both "Israel" and "Jacob" indicate both kingdoms of Israel and suggest a full restoration as a united nation at some point in the future. God demonstrated His mercy by promising His people a glorious future.

Ask Yourself . . . *How often do I reflect upon the future glory God promises to those who follow Him?*

In verse 3 the prophet returned to the battle with colorful and vivid descriptions of the shields, chariots, and spears. The Medes and Babylonians used the color red profusely in the design of their weaponry. They would either paint their shields that color or overlay them with copper to make them appear red in the sunlight. The flashing "metal on the chariots" could be the scythes that projected from the axles of the Babylonian chariots and ripped apart everything in their path.

The chariots of verse 4 may be either the powerful chariots of the invaders or those of the confused Assyrians. The latter possibly sees urgency and panic in the quick motion of the chariots "rushing back and forth through the squares." The

action here was in the suburbs of Nineveh before the battle reached the inner wall. Ancient sources indicate that Assyria won a few battles at this stage of the conflict.

During the battles of that day, it was of utmost importance that the wall be defended. So in the midst of battle, the king summoned the best of his soldiers to the wall to fight off the enemy (vs. 5). Instead of responding with their usual aggressiveness, these warriors stumbled in their panic, which weakened their defenses at the most critical part of the battle.

The Assyrians might have been able to hold off their attackers if it had not been for a critical event accurately predicted by Nahum. Verse 6 says, "The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses." As the city was being besieged by the Medes and Babylonians, heavy rains brought a flood that broke down a portion of the wall. The canal gates on the Tigris River burst open under the pressure and water poured into the city. The foundations of all the major structures, including the palace, were destroyed, just as Nahum had prophesied.

Nahum repeated God's decree "that [the city] be exiled and carried away" (vs. 7). After the siege, all that remained were slave girls moaning the destruction of their homes.

Nahum described the fleeing of people from Nineveh as water draining from a pool (vs. 8). One can almost envision the water and panicked citizens running out of the



Part of the ancient wall of Nineveh, rebuilt last century with some of the original stones. The walls of Nineveh were an imposing obstacle to any army attacking the city.

flooded city. The military commanders yelled “Stop! Stop!” and ordered the people to stand their ground and fight against the invading forces. But in all the confusion, no one paid attention. The defenders of the city refused to remain at their posts, so all was lost.

Through Nahum, God commanded the Babylonians and Medes, “Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold!” (vs. 9). The Assyrian kings had long boasted of all the spoils they had carried away from other lands. Now it was left for their conquerors to carry away. The vastness of the treasures described by Nahum has been verified by history.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I recognize the temporary and fleeting value of earthly wealth?*

Nineveh was once one of the most influential and wealthiest cities in the world. In a matter of days, Nineveh was left desolate, plundered, and in ruins. Courage had been replaced by fear and anguish

as “hearts melt, knees give way” and “bodies tremble” (vs. 10). The people walked about in shock, gradually comprehending the extent of the destruction that had happened before their eyes.

d Nineveh’s Judgment (2:11-13)

**“I am against you,”
declares the LORD Almighty.**

—Nahum 2:13a

Nahum stepped back from the defeat of Nineveh to give an illustration of God’s judgment on the Assyrians. He began by asking, “Where now is the lions’ den . . . ?” (vs. 11). Lions of every form are found everywhere in Assyrian art. Assyrian kings often compared themselves to lions.

Like unmerciful predators, Nineveh’s kings ravaged other peo-

ples. One of the ways these heartless kings would celebrate a military victory was to skin their enemies and stake their exposed bodies to the ground (while they were still alive) to be food for birds of prey. Other Assyrian rulers would roast or boil their living enemies. Death for an adversary of the Assyrians was almost always an extended, torturous process.

As the area's superpower, Nineveh was able to terrorize other nations "with nothing to fear." Like a lion returning to its den, its kings were able to relax in the safety of the city's walls, enjoying the plunder of other nations. But these treasures were soon to be wiped out and the comfortable den destroyed.

Nahum's question about the disappearance of the lion's den points out the completeness of Nineveh's destruction and its total disappearance from human history. After the fall of the city, the area became a place for grazing sheep with no indication of the great city that once occupied the area.

Like lions, the Assyrian kings were brutal in their predatory ways as they instinctively provided for their own (vs. 12). As mentioned previously, the Assyrian kings would take their captives back to Nineveh and make a violent spectacle out of publicly killing them in the cruelest ways imaginable. Like a predator oblivious to the agony of its victims, these kings tore and devoured their prey without mercy.

No wonder God declared, "I am against you" (vs. 13) to these merciless citizens. Up to this point,

Nahum had been interpreting God's message. But then God spoke directly to these wayward people to reinforce His resolve to judge the Assyrians for their conspicuously cruel behavior.

God had given Nineveh a degree of sovereignty over the rest of the world in its day. But instead of using that authority as a gift from God, the nation used its power to ravage the nations around it, including Israel. That caused God to turn against Assyria and guarantee its destruction.

While there is no hope for the one God opposes, the opposite is true for those whom God favors. In Romans 8:31, Paul asked, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" While the Lord brings certain destruction to those who reject and oppose Him, no blessing is spared for those He supports.

Ask Yourself . . . *How does the knowledge that God is for me, not against me, affect my hope in the midst of difficult circumstances?*

The Assyrians depended heavily upon chariots in their campaigns against other countries. But God assured Judah that He would burn these instruments of repression by which they had afflicted the nations (Nah. 1:13b). The destruction of Nineveh would leave it without prey and silence the boasting of its messengers (see II Kings 18:17-35). Its envoys would no longer brag about Assyria's superior gods and military might. For all practical purposes, they ceased to exist.