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Nineveh's Destruction

Nahum 3

a God's Anger with Nineveh (3:1-7)

Woe to the city of blood,
full of lies,
full of plunder,
never without victims!

—Nahum 3:1

Nahum 3 continues the description of the battle at Nineveh and reveals more of the city's wickedness. Again, Nahum told of God's determination to judge the cruel inhabitants of this city. Nineveh's grievous sins provoked God's anger and sealed the fate of the city.

The Lord's recitation of Assyria's sins begins with a proclamation: "Woe to the city of blood" (vs. 1). Nineveh was a city of violence and unspeakable bloodshed. Conquered rivals were publicly tortured and violently put to death. Victims were commonly flayed, impaled, or beheaded in citywide celebrations of victories. The Assyrians may have thought they were getting away with their brutality, but God saw their cruel behavior and determined that their actions would not go unpunished.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I ever wonder why God doesn't immediately do something about the senseless acts of violence in the world?

The phrase "full of lies" refers to the unreliability of Nineveh's promises to other nations. Its treaties to provide security for other countries were never kept. The Assyrians displayed their lust for power and riches by lying to and plundering the nations dependent on them. The Assyrians never lacked victims for their immoral schemes.

Verse 2 takes us back to the sounds and the sights of the battle that destroyed Nineveh. Even though Nahum was prophesying many years in advance, the text reads like an eyewitness account. You can almost hear the crack of the whips as the riders urged their frantic steeds onward. The clattering of the chariots wheels soon drowned out other sounds.

"Charging cavalry" may refer either to horsemen who accompanied the chariots or to the horses that pulled the chariots. With bright, flashing imagery, Nahum described the combat. The flashing of metal, particularly of swords, appeared on



Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria from 745 to 727 B.C., stands in a war chariot like those described by Nahum.

the streets as the battle progressed (vs. 3). The sword was the typical weapon of the foot soldiers who engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

The result of this desperate battle was death; “piles” of dead bodies could be seen everywhere in the city. This grim picture is confirmed by the Babylonian Chronicles, which testify to the brutality of at least one of the battles on the outskirts of Nineveh. The vast number of corpses caused those lucky to be alive to stumble as they were fleeing from the battle.

In verse 4, Nahum turned from the bleak battle scene to focus on why the Lord would judge Nineveh in such a sweeping manner. The use of “prostitute” here implies such things as wantonness, disloyalty, and lust. All of these were appropriate for a city that placed its own interests above everything else—even human life.

Nineveh was a center of worship for Ishtar, who was often portrayed as a harlot. Like a prostitute, Nineveh was able to entice nations with its

charm. Little did these lands know, however, that it was an attraction that would eventually ensnare and destroy them. Through its seductive and treacherous ways, Nineveh was able to make much of the known world subject to its power.

The references to “sorceries” and “witchcraft” indicate the presence of the occult and other satanic influences in Nineveh’s culture. Recent archaeological discoveries attest to the domination of magical arts, witchcraft, and demons throughout the Assyrian society.

The lure of the world’s power is often seductive, but in the end those who pursue the world are often consumed by it. The same powers of wickedness that animated the people of Nineveh continue to do their treacherous work through similar cultures and societies today. This serves as a vivid reminder for us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but . . . against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12).

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I seen the powers of evil influence my culture?*

Because of Nineveh’s sins, the Lord remained determined in His opposition of the city. The punishment described in Nahum 1:5

portrays the shame to be brought upon the wayward woman indicted in verse 4 and was typical of how a prostitute was treated (see Jer. 13:26, 27). In its destruction,

Does Anyone Remember Nineveh?

Within a span of 80 years, Nineveh went from unrivaled world prominence to relative obscurity. One of Nineveh's modern excavators made this comment about its sudden disappearance from human history: "Without the evidence that these monuments afford, we might almost have doubted that Nineveh ever existed, so completely has she become 'a desolation and a waste.'"

The *Cambridge Ancient History* says, "No other land seems to have been sacked and pillaged so completely as was Assyria."

Compare these results with Sennacherib's arrogant boast: "Nineveh, the noble metropolis, the city of beloved Ishtar, wherein are all the meeting-places of the gods and goddesses, the everlasting substructure, the eternal foundation."

Surely God has little tolerance for human pride.

Nineveh would feel the disgrace of an exposed harlot while the other nations would stare in amazement as the wickedness of the once-great city was revealed.

The throwing of "filth," or refuse, was meant to bring contempt to the one on the receiving end (Nah. 3:6). The outward covering of trash exposed Nineveh's true character and made it impossible for it to feign goodness. Just as Nineveh had made a spectacle out of killing its war victims, God would make it a public object of scorn and disgust.

In its shame, Nineveh would stand alone (vs. 7). The witnesses to its demise would flee out of fear that they might suffer the same end. Because of its vicious treatment of the other nations, there would be no one to mourn for it or to comfort it. Not even the Lord could find anyone to mourn for Nineveh.

b The Missed Example of Thebes (3:8-13)

Are you better than Thebes,
situated on the Nile,
with water around her?
The river was her defense,
the waters her wall.

—Nahum 3:8

In verse 8, Nahum turned his attention to Thebes, an Egyptian city that was defeated by the Assyrians in 663 B.C. For almost a thousand years, the pharaohs of Egypt ruled

over their part of the world from Thebes. The city was famous for its splendor and the worship of the

The two cities also used massive walls to provide protection and were thought to be impenetrable.

Who could have imagined that both cities would be destroyed within a span of 51 years? Even though Nineveh was the one that defeated Thebes, the Assyrians didn't think the same thing could happen to them.

Ask Yourself . . .

Do I consider myself immune from the types of tragedies that befall others?

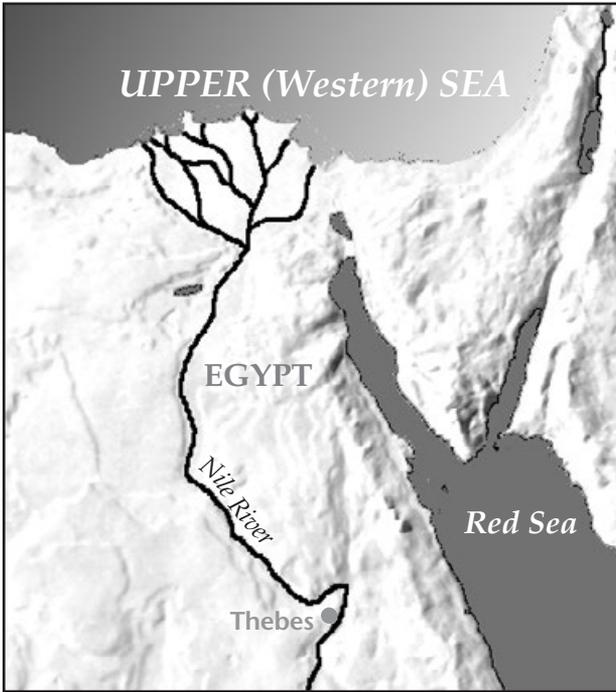
In addition to its natural defenses and great walls, Thebes had something that Nineveh didn't have at the time—strong

god Amon, one of the principal deities of Egypt. Like Nineveh, Thebes was a large city—its outer perimeter measured an enormous 27 miles in length.

Because of the similarities between the two cities, the demise of Thebes should have been a warning for Nineveh that when God determines to judge sin, even the strongest natural defenses cannot prevent Him from carrying out His will. Both Nineveh and Thebes were situated on major rivers that they used as natural barriers to advancing armies.

allies who were willing to come to Egypt's defense. In times of battle, the Egyptian city could count on the powerful Ethiopians (Cush) to the south, as well as the rest of Egypt's armies to come to its rescue (vs. 9). Thebes was also protected by an ancient confederation of states that included "Put and Libya." Libya, located to the west of Egypt, and Put, also in north Africa, were strong nations that kept close ties with the capital city of Egypt.

Despite its provisions for security and powerful allies, Thebes was defeated by the Assyrians and sud-



denly taken into captivity (vs. 10a). The Egyptian leaders provoked the attack by inciting smaller nations to rebel against Assyria. Egypt, along with Thebes, initially surrendered to the advancing Assyrian armies. But a later Egyptian rebellion exhausted the patience of the Assyrians and led to Thebes's destruction.

Nahum's description of a captured city fits well with the historical accounts of Thebes's defeat. The killing of infants shows the cruelty of the Assyrians as they stormed the city. And as was common in ancient warfare, the trained leaders of a city became a prime commodity as they were auctioned off and led away in chains (vs. 10b).

What did Nahum's description of the fall of Thebes mean to Nineveh? Simply that the Assyrians should expect the same thing to happen to them. The prophet said that they, too, would "become drunk" (vs. 11). This probably referred to their inability to defend themselves against the wrath of God that would send them into hiding.

The Ninevites' efforts to find refuge from the advancing enemy would be in vain. The historical accounts of the fall of the Assyrian Empire reveal how the people kept retreating from one defeat to another until the empire was completely destroyed. Those who survived the fall of Nineveh were not able to find any safe haven from the advancing enemies.

In verse 12, Nahum said that Nineveh's "fortresses are like fig trees with their first ripe fruit."

"Fortresses" may refer to the walled cities guarding the approach to Nineveh or to the actual defenses of the city. While these strongholds may have looked imposing, they were ripe for destruction. Just as mature figs fall effortlessly off the trees at harvesttime, so would Nineveh's "fortresses" fall easily in the attack.

The comparison of the Assyrian soldiers to women is probably a metaphor of their weakened condition and inability to stand in battle (vs. 13). It could be, however, that all the fighting men had been beaten and the only ones left to fight were the women. Nineveh became an easy target as the foreign armies, led by Babylon, marched against the city. Eventually, these enemies entered its gates and destroyed the city with fire.

Today, many nations still depend upon their own strength to maintain and defend their territories. Most don't even acknowledge that God exists. On an individual level, many people think that their future depends on things such as their health, jobs, bank accounts, and homes. They, too, fail to acknowledge God as their provider. If history teaches us anything, it's that human resources and strength are no guarantee of security. There is no sanctuary apart from the Lord.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I putting my security in anything or anyone except the Lord?*

C Nineveh's Last Stand (3:14-19)

**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

In verse 14, Nahum gave the Ninevites five futile commands to prepare for the siege against the city. Mockingly, he told them to consider the most extreme measures that might be taken to protect the city. Since God had determined Nineveh's fate, however, no amount of human effort would prevail against God's judgment.

The prophet asked the people

to "draw water for the siege" (vs. 14). In anticipation of an enemy's cutting off the water supply to the city, it was essential that Nineveh have an internal and independent supply of water—a primary need during a siege. The Babylonian Chronicles refer to a three-month siege of Nineveh, during which time the need for water would have been great.

But even with a supply of water inside, it was imperative that a city's defenses hold in times of attack. Nahum advised the Ninevites to pour themselves into strengthening their fortresses. The prophet's encouragement for them to put maximum exertion into building up the city's defenses was intended to show the futility of human efforts.

There, inside its newly fortified walls, Nineveh would be devoured by fire. The inhabitants would be cut down like insects who had been multiplying themselves for generations (vs. 15). The accuracy of Nahum's prediction is indicated by ancient historians and confirmed by the ruins themselves. Greek tradition says that the king of Assyria set his own palace on fire and perished



These pictures of the same fig tree demonstrate what a swarm of locusts can do in fifteen minutes. Nahum had this type of consuming force in mind when he described the attack on Nineveh.

in the flames before the battle was finished. Like locusts who consume everything in their path, swords would utterly destroy the Ninevites.

The Assyrian merchants dominated the ancient world of trade. Like the stars in the night sky, they had multiplied in great number as Nineveh profited from the efforts of its traders (vs. 16a). But the vast amount of wealth accumulated by merchants would not profit Nineveh in the end; it would all be carried away by foreign invaders.

Ask Yourself . . . *How much security do I put in wealth?*

Some interpreters believe that the merchants themselves are the locusts who would “strip the land and then fly away” (vs. 16b). Others, however, equate the locusts with the invading enemies who would plunder all the riches gathered by

the merchants. Either way, the city would not long enjoy the vast treasures it had been hoarding for years.

Beside the merchants, another class of Assyrians would fail miserably in the day of testing. The term “officials” (vs. 17) probably refers to the leaders or captains of the vast Assyrian armies. Like locusts, they had also multiplied to include a great number. Again Nahum pointed out that human effort, even with vast numbers involved, could not save Nineveh.

When the time of trouble would come, these esteemed leaders would “fly away” like insects departing from a wall on a warm day. In the hour of need, these captains would abandon Assyria and leave it without the leadership it desperately needed.

Nahum directly addressed the king of Assyria, telling him that his “shepherds slumber” and his “nobles lie down to rest” (vs. 18).

Some see this as a foreshadowing of the death of these nobles. But others believe this refers to their ineffectiveness and disloyalty to the king, who may have been unaware of the failing condition of his empire.

The picture of sheep scattered without a shepherd is a familiar figure in Scripture. Because of the breakdown in leadership that led to defeat, the people of Assyria would be



dispersed on the mountains, hiding in caves without leadership and without hope of any sort of restoration.

The greed of merchants, the breakdown of leadership within the army, the loss of allegiance on the part of ruling officials, and the king's own lack of authority all contributed to Nineveh's fall. But it would be the king's own wounds that would prove fatal to the city's chances of survival (vs. 19).

The king on the throne during Nahum's time was probably Ashurbanipal, one of the cruelest and most oppressive kings who ever reigned in Nineveh. But verse 19 may refer to one of his successors, the king who perished in his own palace during the final siege on the city.

The king's demise would bring joy to all those who heard or saw. The nations around Assyria would rejoice in the news that this tyrannical king and nation had been destroyed. Just as people today still celebrate the fall of Nazi Germany, so the people of Nahum's time would long commemorate the passing of Assyria.

The fulfillment of Nahum's prophecy concerning Nineveh took place in about 612 B.C., or perhaps 50 years after Nahum's ministry. Just as the prophet predicted, the city was plundered of all its wealth and totally destroyed by fire. The once mighty and magnificent city was left in ruins, never to be rebuilt or inhabited again.