

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Nahum

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The Message of Micah: Who's In Charge?

Who's in charge?

Authority, it has been said, is like soap: the more you use it, the less you have of it. Holman Jenkins, writing in the Wall Street Journal a few years ago, observed,

It's safe to say that many CEOs see what they do as little more than a variation on inglorious widget making. They enjoy the opportunity to be in charge, but most don't kid themselves about the exalting nature of the work. At the pinnacles of American business, they're treated literally like [donkeys], nose to the ground following a bunch of carrots laid out in a row, tied to the stock price. How many senior executives would give it all up for a bucket of warm spit? Probably more than you think. (Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., "Optioning Out of the CEO Life – and Into Veethood," *The Wall Street Journal*, 8/23/2000, A23)

I wonder what circumstances of life remind you of how little you are in charge. Certainly it could be thoughts of your own mortality. But it could be other things too: haunting sins from your past, whose repercussions continue to outstretch your original expectations; uncertainty about the future; fear of other people; things you don't like about yourself; desires you cannot seem to control; the toll the years have taken on you; the uncertainty of how you will continue caring for that person as you should. So many circumstances; so little control.

Introducing Nahum

That was exactly the situation in which God's people found themselves in the middle of the seventh century B.C., when the prophet Nahum wrote his book. Nahum is one of the minor prophets, whose books comprise the last twelve books in the Old Testament. We do not know anything about Nahum the man, except that he was an Elkoshite. Of course, we don't know where Elkosh was. Nahum is unusual among the prophets for writing a book: "An oracle concerning Nineveh."

To give you a quick overview, chapter 1 of Nahum begins with an introductory psalm on the character of God (1:2-8). In the rest of chapter 1 and the beginning of

chapter 2 (1:9-2:2), Nahum moves back and forth between addressing God's people, Judah, and addressing the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Several verses into chapter 2, the prophet begins to speak to Nineveh at length (2:3-3:19), and it becomes clear what this vision is about: God's promise to destroy the Ninevites utterly as judgment for their sins.

As we look through the book of Nahum, we will look for the answer to the question, who is in charge?

Are God's people in charge?

I guess the self-confident answer to the question of who is in charge would be, "We are! We as God's people are in charge." But is this what Nahum says? Let's begin by looking at the latter part of the first chapter and the beginning of the second chapter, where God addresses both Judah and Nineveh.

Nahum 1:7-2:2

According to this passage, the Old Testament people of God (and by implication, we, if we are Christians) clearly did not have control. No, they needed a refuge (1:7). They had been afflicted, their necks had been weighed down with yokes, and their arms and legs had been bound with shackles (1:12-13). Now, whether Nahum was literally referring to enslavement or metaphorically referring to the fact that Judah had to pay a crippling tribute to the king of Assyria, we cannot say. Many people in the northern kingdom of Israel had been carried into captivity – perhaps some in actual shackles – by the Assyrians decades earlier, before Nahum prophesied.

Assyria was the great power in that region of the world in the eighth and most of the seventh century B.C. The capital city of Nineveh – located on the east side of the Tigris in an area bordering what is today the city of Mosul, Iraq – was one of the grandest and most powerful cities on earth.

Jonah had preached in Nineveh perhaps a century earlier, leading the polytheistic Ninevites to repent. But that was the middle of the eighth century; it was now the middle of the seventh, and their repentance was a thing of the past. They destroyed the northern ten tribes of Israel and their capital, Samaria, in 722 B.C., probably just a few decades after their repentance in Jonah's day. Under Ashurbanipal, they pushed their conquests hundreds of miles into Egypt by 663, even reaching the city of Thebes (3:8), and Egypt fell to them.

Throughout these conquests all around them, Judah sat there in the mountains, watching. You realize, don't you, that the people of Judah were the "hillbillies" of their day? The water front folk – whether on coastlines or great inland waterways – are always the cosmopolitan and sophisticated ones. Think of the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Assyrians, or the Babylonians, with their fertile valleys and coastlines. The people of Judah, on the other hand, lived up in the hills – Jerusalem is over 2,500 feet above sea level and without major rivers flowing into the sea. There they sat for years and decades, watching the tide of the Assyrian empire rise up and wash around them, threatening their cities as its power grew higher and higher.

It was during this time, a time when the greatest power in the world was cutting Judah's limbs, torturously approaching its heart in Jerusalem, that Nahum prophesied. And it is right here that we find the book's enduring relevance for today: God's people could not have had *less* control of their dire circumstances than they did; but God continued to call them through his prophet and his Word to trust him as *much* as ever.

I don't know exactly how your life is going right now. Maybe things are going really well for you, and you are in one of the "fat and happy" periods of your life. If that describes you, you should stop and check yourself. Do you really think that you are in charge of your world? I would agree that you are in charge of every world that you *create*!

Are their enemies in charge?

Are the enemies of God and of God's people in charge?

Most of Nahum's book is taken up with the enemies of God's people – and for good reason. These harassers were powerful and cruel. We know from extrabiblical sources that the mighty Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (rules 668-629 B.C.) wanted no question left about whether he was in charge. On one occasion, he boastfully wrote down (or caused to be written down) how he dealt with plotters against his throne who had been discovered:

“As for those common men who had spoken derogatory things against my god Asher and had plotted against me, the prince who reveres him, I tore out their tongues and abased them. As a posthumous offering I smashed the rest of the people alive by the very figures of protective deities between which they had smashed Sennacherib my grandfather.

Their cut-up flesh, I fed to the dogs, swine, jackals, birds, vultures, to the birds of the sky, and to the fishes of the deep pools.”

There were no internment camps. There were no Geneva Conventions of War with the Assyrians. No, the bas-reliefs in the British Museum in London depict men impaled by spikes, piles of heads, and otherwise mutilated bodies.

Yet God is not intimidated by any nation. No king has any power except for the power that God gives. And he deposes kings and kingdoms as quickly as he raises them up. Nahum’s remarkable book, written in the face of such an awful and awesome earthly power, reminds these enemies of God who is and who is not in charge.

Nahum 2:3-13

And then, in chapter 3.

The whole point of the book of Nahum is made most explicit in the last verse of the second chapter, where the Almighty God says to the mighty Assyria, “I am against you” (2:13; also 3:5). More serious words cannot be imagined. God is not just saying that he will desert Assyria or separate from Assyria. He is promising to actively oppose them: *“I am against you!”*

In the book of Nahum, God notifies Assyria that its time has run out. His patience with its sinful ways has ended, and the self-imagined invincible empire will be defeated. So complete will be its defeat, the Lord says, that “you will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile” (1:14).

Nahum uses a different image to express the defeat that God will hand the Ninevites. Nineveh is like a powerful lion that once killed at its pleasure but now will be completely lost (2:11-12). Nineveh is like a harlot, an immoral seducer of the nations who allured and enslaved peoples (3:4) but who will now be exposed in her lewdness and made a spectacle (3:5-6). Nahum also reminds Assyria of its own victory over once-proud Thebes, the capital of the southern part of Egypt about four hundred miles south of modern Cairo (3:8-10). Ashurbanipal had destroyed Thebes in 63 B.C. Now, what they did in Thebes will be done to them.

Keep in mind, Nahum’s prophecy would have been written in the fifty-year stretch between Thebes’s fall in 663 and Nineveh’s fall in 612. He wrote, in other words,

when, from Judah's standpoint, Assyria was at the height of its power and the empire was intact. What could Nahum have been thinking! He was a prophet from a tiny nation speaking to the greatest empire in the world. How could something as large, powerful, and old as Nineveh simply be removed?

Nineveh's end was absolutely traumatic. The Medes, in an alliance with the Babylonians and the Scythians, laid siege to the city in 612 B.C and then found themselves aided by rain and rising rivers. These rivers that had aided in the city's protection flooded up against the city's walls until great sections of the walls fell away, just as Nahum had predicted (2:6). The attackers then poured into the city and sacked it. Before the invaders could grab him, Assyria's king gathered himself and his household together in an immense funeral pyre and burned himself, his wives, and his concubines to ashes. The invaders, running rampant in the city, plundered Nineveh dry. When the site of ancient Nineveh was finally discovered and excavated in the nineteenth century, archeologists found no stores of silver and gold object, as they were hoping they would. It was absolutely empty. Everything was taken – "stripped" bare (2:10). After pillaging the city, the invaders then burned and razed it to the ground. Indeed, these first archeologists found unusually deep strata of ashes.

Nineveh passed with unusual speed from the very center of history to being entirely forgotten. Its location became lost to human memory and became a matter for speculation for over two thousand years. People knew the name "Nineveh" from the Bible and from Babylonian records, but they could not figure out where it was located. It was not until 1842 that archeologists rediscovered it.

You may be enjoying some measure of power or success now (probably not as much as the Assyrians did!), but I hope you realize how fast and how far you can fall. The God of the book of Nahum is not only the God over his people; he executes justice against everyone who has sinned against him. In fact, the second verse of the book repeats three times that the Lord will take such vengeance: "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath (1:2).

If you happen to consider yourself an enemy of God, I must tell you on the basis of the book of Nahum, "Beware!" You cannot oppose God with impunity. You will never win.

Is God in charge?

Okay, if we are not in charge, and if God's enemies are not in charge – even the ones who appear to be more powerful – then who is? Is God in charge?

Of course, that is the answer given by the book of Nahum and every other book in the Bible – God is in charge. Let's look now at Nahum's opening stanza.

Nahum 1:2-8

The implied answer to those two questions in verse 6 – “Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?” is “no one!” God is most powerful.

Aside from his power, we also learn something about his character: He is jealous. He does not want false gods to be worshiped, because he is the one and only true God. He is also patient. He is not quick to anger, Nahum tells us (1:3). This is how God has always revealed himself to his people, as he did to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:6).

Yet God's patient and long-suffering nature should never be taken to indicate that he is indifferent, as if the fact that he has not yet punished someone means he never will. The one does not follow from the other? There is a world of difference between God's patience and supposed divine indifference. This all-powerful, jealous God has committed himself to the truth and to avenging himself. He will not leave the guilty unpunished (1:3). So Nahum let it be known that God would punish Nineveh. And so he did.

If you are a non-Christian, ask yourself, what would change in your life if you acknowledged, as the Bible teaches, that there is a God and that he is in charge? What would change in your life if you acknowledged, as the Bible teaches, that he is both completely good and morally pure and that you are not? If you acknowledged, as the Bible teaches, that you are in rebellion against him, no matter how “polite: your rebellion may look? Any doubt that you may still have concerning God's sovereignty, God's holiness, and your own sinfulness will one day be removed. I am certain about that.

As Samuel Johnson said to his biographer James Boswell, “Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

As our church continues to grow, I pray that we may remember that God is in charge. What have you thought causes churches to grow? The congregation's patience? Good leaders? Well-planned services? Culturally sensitive, age-appropriate evangelism? Paul had a different idea. As he said to the Christians in Corinth, I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). God makes things grow! You can take the same methodology and use it in two different churches, and God will sovereignly bless one and not the other. That's up to God! In that sense, my words to you as a preacher are more important than I am. It is the truth of the gospel that God uses.

Conclusion

Only two of the minor prophets end their book with a question. In the book of Jonah, God concludes the book by remonstrating Jonah for his callousness toward the people (of all places) Nineveh. "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" God asks (John 4:11).

Now in the book of Nahum, Nahum concludes by telling the king of Assyria, "Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty? By concluding his book with a question, it is almost as if the prophet wants to draw the reader's mind back to Jonah's prophecy from a century earlier and the mercies that God had shown the people of Nineveh. Eventually, Nineveh decided to spurn God's mercies and choose violent materialism, gross selfishness, idolatry, and witchcraft. They had repented of their repentance.

So Nineveh, once the object of God's mercy, became the object of God's wrath. In the final chapter, Nahum promises that Nineveh would be drunk (Nahum 3:11). But that he meant that the city would be required to drink the cup of God's wrath to the bitter dregs (cf. Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15). And sure enough, the city fell.

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)