



## **'God Is Jealous and the Lord Avenges'**

### ***The Central Message of Nahum***

One of the leading emphases of Scripture is that God, the Maker of heaven and earth, is sovereign over the nations. It is a truth that we sorely need to affirm in the present-day, given not only what we have seen recently with the terrorist attacks in the United States but also the litany of horror of the century just past. Think of the horrors of the concentration camps of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, the madness of Maoist China, especially during the cultural revolution in the late sixties, the gruesome experiment carried out by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the death and suffering brought about by the power-hungry Saddam Hussein, the bloodbaths of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the terrorist attacks by the IRA and Palestinian groups – the list of horrors seems endless. In an insightful book, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*, Paul Johnson details much of the madness of the twentieth century. It makes for very depressing reading. Speaking, for example, of Hitler's attempt to utterly destroy the Jewish race, known to high-ranking Nazi officials as 'the final solution', he states that:

*The final solution became fact from the spring of 1942. The first mass-gassings began at Belzec on 17 March 1942. This camp had the capacity to kill 15,000 a day. The next month came Sobibor (20,000 a day), Treblinka and Maidanek (25,000) and Auschwitz, which Hoess called 'the greatest institution for human annihilation of all time'. The documentation on the genocide is enormous. The figures almost defy belief. By December 1941 Hitler had about 8,700,000 Jews under his rule. Of these he had by early 1945 murdered at least 5,800,000: 2,600,000 from Poland, 750,000 from Russia, 750,000 from Romania, 402,000 from Hungary, 277,000 from Czechoslovakia, 180,000 from Germany, 104,000 from Lithuania, 106,000 from the Netherlands, 83,000 from France, 70,000 from Latvia, 65,000 each from Greece and Austria, 60,000 from Yugoslavia, 40,000 from Bulgaria, 28,000 from Belgium and 9,000 from Italy.*

(p. 415)

For a more recent example of evil, though not on the scale of Hitler's 'final solution', yet one that truly deserves to be described as evil, one has only to think of the 1996 massacre of Scottish schoolchildren in the market town of Dunblane, four miles from Stirling, by Thomas Hamilton. Bursting into a physical education class being conducted in the gym of Dunblane Primary School with four guns on March 13 of that year, Hamilton began to fire randomly on the children and their teacher. After he had fatally shot sixteen children and their teacher, he killed himself.

The incident has been described as '*the worst massacre by a lone gunman in British history*'.

Where is God in all of this? Is he sovereign or not? Does he really punish the wicked or do they perpetrate their crimes and get off scot-free? These are very disturbing questions. But they are questions that Scripture tackles head on and answers. Consider, for instance, the Old Testament book of Nahum. This minor prophet has one major theme: God will be the destroyer of evil and wrong; he is the enemy of all who defy his lordship and he will judge them. Ultimately, Nahum tells us, it is he, the Sovereign Lord – and not humans – who will execute vengeance on the wicked and bring justice to the earth. This theme, so pertinent for our day, is developed in the book against the historical backdrop of the Assyrian empire and its brutal domination of the Ancient Near East, an empire which perpetrated some of the worst atrocities in human history.

## **Assyrian Domination of the Ancient Near East**

For centuries, the Assyrians were the terror of the Ancient Near East. From Nineveh, now in modern Iraq, they launched forth in every direction, using what was then the latest in military hardware, chariots and cavalry, to execute devastating blitzkrieg conquests of most of their neighbours. Nahum 3:1-3 well describes in staccato form the campaigns of the Assyrian army.

*The noise of a whip and the noise of the rattling wheels, of galloping horses, of clattering chariots! Horsemen charge with bright sword and glittering spear. There is a multitude of slain, a great number of bodies, countless corpses – they stumble over the corpses.*

A number of these campaigns are mentioned in Scripture. For instance, in 1 Chronicles 5:25-26 we read of some of Israel's tribes being unfaithful to the Lord and being taken into captivity by Tiglath-Pileser III, also known by the name of Pul. He reigned from 745-727 B.C. and was the architect behind the tremendous growth of the Assyrian Empire. He drove Assyrian conquests into the heart of what is now modern Turkey, Syria and Israel. In this text of Scripture we see what was standard Assyrian policy: deportation. Local leaders would be removed to another part of the Assyrian empire so as to reduce those who remained to subservience. When Tiglath-Pileser III died in 727 he left for his son, Shalmaneser V, an empire which extended from the Persian Gulf to the borders of Egypt and that ran through north Syria into central Turkey.

Shalmaneser V was king from 727-722 B.C. It was he who reduced the northern kingdom of Israel to a vassal-state (see 2 Kings 17:1-3). But in the year 724 B.C. the king of Israel, Hoshea, renounced his allegiance to Assyria and made secret overtures to the other super-power of the day, Egypt, Assyria's arch-enemy. It was a fatal political mistake, as 2 Kings 17:4-6 delineates for us. It appears that Hoshea was captured outside the walls of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and deported to Assyria. Shalmaneser subsequently laid siege to the capital city, sacked it, and destroyed the northern kingdom as a political entity.

Now, when the Assyrians conquered a city and a people they were utterly ruthless. Look at Hosea 13:16, a prophetic word given through the mouth of Hosea about twenty years before the fall of Samaria. The Assyrians would also as a matter of course decapitate most of the defenders of a conquered city and take 'a head count', which would be written up in the royal records when the conquering Assyrian army returned home.

The pinnacle of Assyrian conquests was that of Egypt, which, for centuries, was their arch-rival for domination of the Ancient Near East. Egypt fell before Assyrian might in 671 B.C., when the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681-669), who is mentioned in passing in 2 Kings 19:37 and who was a brilliant general, led his troops in a campaign that was conducted with lightning speed. When, a few years later in 663 B.C., Egypt rebelled and sought to throw off Assyrian domination, Assyrian retaliation was swift and brutal. They sacked and destroyed the centre of the Egyptian kingdom, the city of No Amon or Thebes, one of the most magnificent cities of the ancient world. This event was later vividly recalled in Nahum 3:8-10, which depicts the brutality of the Assyrians when it states of No Amon that '*her young children also were dashed in pieces at the head of every street*'.

With the elimination of Egypt as a player on the international scene of politics, the Assyrian Empire was at the height of its power and was seemingly invincible. Nahum can thus compare Assyria to a pride of lions who have ravaged the earth with none, it appears, who can stand before them (Nahum 2:11-12). Assyrian wealth was beyond compare, for they had filled their cities with the plunder of the nations (Nahum 2:8-9).

In all of their military campaigns, the Assyrians suffered only one major defeat: they failed to take Jerusalem. In Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Kings 18-19 there is the thrilling account of how God fought for his city and his people. The Assyrians were convinced they were invincible, and that Judah and Jerusalem would fall to them as had all the other nations that they had attacked. In 2 Kings 18:28-35 we have recorded the boastful words of a leading Assyrian official called the Rabshakeh, who clearly regards the LORD God of Israel as a god like the false gods of other nations. Did the gods

of those nations help them stop Assyrian military machine, he asks? No. And just as the gods of the other nations could not prevent them falling captive to the Assyrians, nor will the God of Judah.

But the Assyrians had made one fundamental mistake: the LORD God is not simply one of the earth's gods, one among the many deities worshipped by men. He is totally different from all of those beings whom men and women call gods, as a passage like Nahum 1:3b-6 clearly shows.

*The Lord has his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, and the flower of Lebanon wilts. The mountains quake before him, the hills melt, and the earth heaves at his presence, yes, the world, and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of his anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him.*

As Old Testament scholar John Oswalt has pointed out in his commentary on Isaiah 1-39, if the God of Judah is simply one of the gods, if the biblical religion is merely one more religion among the many of the Ancient Near East, then the Rabshakeh's logic is irrefutable. But if the biblical claims of this passage from Nahum are correct, then what the Assyrians may have done to other gods is completely irrelevant. Here they are face to face with a Being of a completely different order than any they have ever met before.

Ultimately, here is the heart of Assyria's sinfulness: her pride and her arrogance, her self-reliance and her self-confidence, her utter disregard of the true and living God. Her brutality and imperialism are simply a manifestation of this much deeper problem of pride.

### **God's Judgement on the Assyrian Empire**

How did God respond to the pride and awful atrocities of the Assyrians? For many years, even centuries, he was patient towards this nation. Look at those marvellous words in Nahum 1:3: *'The Lord is slow to anger.'* An example of his patience and long-suffering with the sins of the Assyrians is found in another of the Minor Prophets, Jonah, whom God sent to call Assyria to repentance.

Now, it is important to realize that God's long-suffering towards Assyria is not due to a lack of power. Thus, immediately after Nahum has mentioned God's patience, he states that God is *'great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked'* (Nahum 1:3b). When Assyria consistently spurned God and his lordship, and worshipped her own military might, she experienced the full force of God's power in judgement and fury.

In a number of verses the prophet foretells the judgement that God is going to bring to pass on the Assyrian Empire. In Nahum 1:14 he predicts that God is going to obliterate the Assyrian Empire with all of her false gods. This prophecy of doom is reiterated at the end of the book, in Nahum 3:18-19:

*Your shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria; your nobles rest in the dust. Your people are scattered on the mountains, and no one gathers them. Your injury has no healing, your wound is severe. All who hear news of you will clap their hands over you, for upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually?*

The term 'shepherds', it should be noted, was a common Old Testament designation for rulers. With the demise of her 'shepherds', her rulers and her nobles, Nahum predicts that Nineveh's people will be scattered on the mountains, scattered without a trace throughout the nations, with no hope of healing or having their nation preserved.

In Nahum 2:13 the prophet warns Assyria that God is going to destroy her pride and joy, that is, her army. The mainstay of the army, the Assyrian chariots, and Assyria's military men, here described as *'young lions'*, will be laid low and destroyed. And the feet of those messengers whom the Assyrian government sent to other nations in order to bully them into submission, men like the

Rabshakeh of 2 Kings 18, will no longer tread the roads of the Near East. Instead, there will be messengers who bring good tidings and who proclaim peace (Nahum 1:15).

Judgement came as the prophet predicted, and it came swiftly. Forty or so years after Nahum delivered this prophecy, in 612 B.C., Nineveh was sacked and utterly levelled into a heap of debris by a combined force of Babylonians and Medes. So thorough was the destruction that Nineveh's location ceased to be known in the ancient world. Indeed, until 1845, when A. H. Layard began excavation on the site, Nineveh was lost in the sands of history. In one fell swoop the Assyrian Empire all but totally disappeared from the face of the earth. As the prophet states in Nahum 1:6 God is a sovereign God, and none who are evil can withstand him.

### **Nahum's Word to Our Generation**

The prophecy of Nahum displays a theme which many professing Christians have forgotten in their exclusive focus on God as a God of love. The book of Nahum reminds us that God is an enemy to all who defy his lordship and sovereignty. Such will experience his wrath and fury. As we read in chapter 1, verse 2:

*'God is jealous, and the LORD avenges; the LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserves wrath for his enemies'.*

Some of God's enemies experience judgement on the stage of history, as in the case of Assyria. Others appear to get off lightly. But there is a day of judgement coming when all will stand before the living God and face his judgement. The kings of Assyria will be there on that great day – Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmeneser V, Sennacherib; Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler will be there; Mao Tse-Tung the Ayatollah Khomeini, and Saddam Hussein will have to give an account of their lives and crimes. O what a fearful day!

But not only will the rulers of history be there, but also all of those whom they ruled. Great and small, all will be there. And there will be none who will be able to look to their 'good deeds' as a refuge from the wrath of God. For, Scripture tells us, all have sinned and done that which is evil in the sight of God. Oh no, we may not have sinned as a Tiglath-Pileser III or a Hitler have done, but still we have sinned and broken God's laws. On that great and terrible day humanity will be divided into two groups: the wicked who have throughout their lives spurned God and his Son, the Lord Jesus, and the wicked who have fled to the only safe refuge – the cross – and have put their trust in the crucified Lord of glory, Jesus of Nazareth. The cross, where God's wrath fell on the sinless Jesus and where he took the punishment due sinners, that is the only safe refuge.

Although the main theme of Nahum is the sovereign judgement of God that he will execute on the wicked, there is also an indication that those who flee to God for refuge will find mercy on the great and terrible day of the Lord. In Nahum 1:7 we read that *'the LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knows those who trust in him'*. This thought is more fully developed in Romans 5:6-9:

*When we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.*

On that day of which we have been speaking, salvation by sovereign grace will be one's only hope.

When Andrew Fuller, the great English Baptist theologian of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, lay dying in 1815 he wrote to one of his close friends:

*I have no other hope, than from salvation by mere sovereign ... grace, through the atonement of my Lord and Saviour. With this hope I can go into eternity with composure.*

Reader, is this your hope? If not, take stock of your future: judgement at the hands of a holy God who will not let the wicked go unpunished, and now, while there is still time, flee from the wrath to come, flee to Jesus: *'The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knows those who trust in him.'*

Michael AG Haykin

© 2016

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)