

Chapter Twenty-three

God Answers: Nahum, Habakkuk

The two prophets, Nahum and Habakkuk, both deal with a common problem in the life of believers: the anger we often feel at God when He does not act as we expect Him to.

Nahum's name means "comfort" and though the prophet's message is conveyed in strong and forceful language, nevertheless his message is basically one of comfort to the southern kingdom of Judah. He prophesied at the height of Assyrian power after Sennacherib had invaded the kingdom and the northern kingdom of Israel had been carried away into Assyrian exile. It looked as though Judah would shortly suffer the same fate, but Nahum was sent to declare that it was rather the seemingly resistless might of Assyria that would be crushed and judged. There was warning in this too for Judah, but the essential message of Nahum was that God answers the plight of His people and moves in unexpected ways to deliver them.

Very little is known of the prophet Nahum except that he came from the village of Elkosh, whose location is uncertain. There is some indication that it was in Galilee and it is interesting to note that the name Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee literally means "the village of Nahum." The prophet's message is directed against Nineveh, the same Nineveh we saw humbled and repenting under Jonah's ministry. But Nahum prophesied some 70 years after Jonah's day and by his time the Assyrian capital had fallen again into its violent and degraded ways.

The prophecy opens with a striking vision of the majesty and might of God. He is described as a God of zealous consistency in defending His holy and righteous character. Yet He is slow to anger and, though merciful, is never mocked. The prophet sees Him as moved at last by the wickedness and cruelty of the Assyrians to permit His anger to burn in terrible fury. We can get some idea of the awfulness of the divine anger in the fact that every Hebrew word for anger is compacted together in the first nine verses. They combine to picture God as burning with a terrible blistering rage.

Yet He does not strike out in all directions, as in a temper tantrum, but directs His rage against those who are most guilty. Verses 11 through 15 most probably describe the Assyrian king Sennacherib who had invaded Judah in the days of Hezekiah, as recorded in Isaiah 36 and 37. He is described by Nahum as one who came "out from you, who plotted evil against the Lord, and counseled villainy" (1:11). But in verse 14 the prophet says: "The Lord has given commandment about you: 'No more shall your name be perpetuated, from the house of your gods I will cut off the graven image and the molten image. I will make your grave, for you are vile'" (1:14). This was fulfilled literally in the murder of Sennacherib who, while worshipping in the temple of his gods, was struck down and murdered by his sons who then took his throne.

Verse 15 seems to reflect the joyful shout that went up from Jerusalem when news was brought of Sennacherib's death. "Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked come against you, he is utterly cut off" (1:15).

In chapter 2 the prophet looks on to describe in vivid detail the siege and fall of Nineveh, which historically occurred in 612 B.C. when the Babylonians and Medes finally overthrew the city. The entire chapter is a remarkable dirge which vividly describes the attacking army, the red uniforms of the Babylonians, the raging of their chariots through the streets of the city, and the drunken, half asleep responses of the Assyrians as they stumbled to their assigned defense posts.

Verse 6 says, "The river gates are opened, the palace is in dismay." The historian Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century B.C., declares: "There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken until the river became an enemy to the city. And in the third year of the sedge, the river being swollen with continual rains, overflowed every part of the city and broke down the wall for twenty furlongs. Then the king, thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river become an enemy to the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace and, collecting together all his wealth and his concubines and eunuchs, burned himself and the palace with them all, and the enemy entered at the breach that the waters had made and took the city." Thus Nahum's prophecy was fulfilled in precise detail

In the latter part of chapter 2 the prophet predicts that Nineveh's destruction would bring about total desolation and this was fulfilled so completely that when Alexander the Great marched across the site of Nineveh in 331 B.C he did not know that a great city had once stood there. It was not until 1845 that the site of Nineveh was identified and its ruins uncovered.

Chapter 3 states the reasons for the overthrow of Nineveh. The prophet declares, "Woe to the bloody city all full of lies and booty--no end to the plunder!" (3:1) God's anger is awakened because of the legendary cruelty of the Assyrian armies and their ruthless plundering of the nations around by means of deceptive agreements which they broke without warning or regard.

In verse 8 the prophet asks, "Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her, her rampart a sea, and water her wall?" This great city of Egypt was located some 400 miles up the Nile and was regarded as one of the impregnable fortresses of the day, yet it was destroyed by Ashurbanipal in 663 B.C. God thus warns Nineveh that if such a great city could fall, so Nineveh's overthrow was equally possible. The prophecy ends with the words, "There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is grievous. All who hear the news of you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?" (3:19). The Assyrians attempted to gain rule over all of western Asia and were universally despised. When Nineveh was destroyed there was rejoicing throughout the whole of the known world for Assyrian arrogance and cruelty was hated everywhere.

Thus Nahum's word brought comfort to a nation threatened by a godless, cruel and rapacious foe. Yet Scripture speaks of a latter-day Assyrian which shall rise as a godless and cruel power, which again will dominate the world of the end times. It is not surprising that many Bible scholars have identified this with Russia. It is striking that here the Lord addresses Nineveh twice saying, "Behold, I am against you"; and in Ezekiel's description of the invasion of Israel by the northern army in the last days, he begins chapter 39 with similar words, "Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal." Perhaps it is time again to reassert God's capacity for anger and judgment. It is a mistake to think that God is so loving that He cannot punish sin, for as Charles Spurgeon has said, "He who does not believe that God will punish sin will not believe that He will pardon it through the blood of His Son."

HABAKKUK

The little prophecy of Habakkuk is undoubtedly one of the most important books in all the Bible, for it answers the question, "Why does God permit the righteous to suffer and the wicked to flourish?"

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah who ministered in Judah, as Jeremiah did, just before the Babylonian invasion. It was a time of gross spiritual decline and widespread injustice within the nation. The name *Habakkuk* means "the embracer." It suggests the picture of a father whose son has been injured by some passing bully and he gathers up the hurt child and comforts him while bitterness enters his own heart. He cries out in perplexity, "Why doesn't God do something? How can a just God permit such wrong?"

So the prophet Habakkuk gathered up the hurt of Judah and the righteous remnant within it and cried out in perplexity at the seeming silence of God. His first cry is: "Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is slacked and justice

never goes forth" (1:3, 4).

God answers in verses 5 through 11, saying in effect, "I am doing something. I am raising up the Chaldeans to punish the wicked in Israel. I am not indifferent, but am moving to judge evil."

But this brings no relief to the troubled prophet, for if he was puzzled by the apparent inactivity of God against the wickedness of the rulers of Israel, he is now even more troubled by the problem of how a righteous and holy God can use an ungodly nation to punish His own people. The Chaldeans are well known for their crass indifference to human suffering, and their gross immorality and callous luxury. So the prophet asks, "Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly slaying nations forever?" (1:17).

When no answer comes to his tormented question, the prophet retreats to his watchtower where in silence he will wait for God's reply. Soon the answer comes for the Lord commands him to write that a day of judgment awaits the Chaldeans as well, but it will not be immediately. Habakkuk is encouraged by the words, "If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (2:3). And then he is given the key message of the entire Bible, "Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith" (2:4). This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament--in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. In each of these great books a different emphasis is underscored. In Romans the emphasis is upon the words "the righteous." In Galatians, it is upon the words "shall live." While in Hebrews the emphasis is upon the words "by his faith." Literally the verse declares that the unrighteous soul is puffed up and is thus "not upright in him." It is a picture of pride and its effect upon the human ego. It puffs it up in arrogance and self-sufficiency. As a result, the unrighteous perish, but the man or woman of faith is living by another principle. It is a confidence that God is at work and will not fail to fulfill His determined purposes. The result of that is life. Faith then is the principle of life, in spite of all appearances at the present moment; but pride is the principle of death, despite the present appearances.

The prophet is then shown five woes which are addressed against the characteristics of pride. The first, ambition, is denounced. The ambitious man carries within himself the seed of his own destruction, for he is ultimately crushed by the ambitions of others. The greedy likewise overreach themselves and lose all. The violent man ends by destroying himself. The insolent man becomes sated with his contempt, and thus the cup of judgment in the Lord's right hand comes 'round to him as well. The idolater trusts his own creation and finds himself left without help in the day of his own need. So Habakkuk is reassured that the Chaldean onslaught against Judah will not be left unavenged, for the attacker carries the seed of his own destruction within himself. The prophet is left with the words, "But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (2:20).

In the third chapter Habakkuk is granted a vision of God moving in judgment against the proud. It comes as an answer to his prayer in which he requests that God will make known to him both His wrath and His mercy. In majestic and moving poetry, the prophet then reveals the might and glory of God which he saw. "His brightness was like the light, rays flashed from his hand, and there he veiled his power. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind. He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered, the everlasting hills sank low. His ways were as of old" (3:4-6). He goes on to describe God as striding the earth in fury, trampling the nations in His anger, as crushing the head of the wicked and stripping him naked before the world.

As a result of such a vision, the prophet declares, "I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us" (3:16). Thus he has learned that when God gives a promise, those who wait in faith will surely see its fulfillment. Meanwhile, their faith is the principle of life for them despite the circumstances.

And so his puzzled cry turns at last to singing and the prophet closes the prophecy with these beautiful words: "Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places" (3:17-19).

The application of this to our own hearts is plain. We, too, live in the days of the apparent silence of God. Under a silent heaven, we watch injustice and cruelty and violence rule the earth. Nothing seems to intervene, and our heart questions, "Is God too weak or too indifferent to help us?" But the answer is that evil and injustice has already received its death blow. On a cross outside Jerusalem God has done all He needs to do to end the blight of sin, except for the actual destruction of the wicked. His last word spoken to the race was that of love and grace uttered on the cross. His next word must be wrath and judgment, but as Peter tells us, He is long-suffering, "not wishing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9). The word of Habakkuk is that faith waits in confidence that God will complete His work in His own good time, and meantime we, like the prophet, may rejoice in the fact that the Lord is our strength. As Psalm 50:3 puts it: "Our God comes, he does not keep silence."

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