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September 10th: Nahum 1 & Matthew 9:18-34

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The wrath of the jealous God against Nineveh. The healing of the ruler's daughter and the woman with the issue of blood.

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Transcript

Nahum chapter 1, an oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkush. The Lord is a jealous and avenging God.

The Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.

His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry. He dries up all the rivers.

Bayshin and Carmel wither. The bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him.

The hills melt. The earth heaves before him. The world and all who dwell in it.

Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. The Lord is good, a

stronghold in the day of trouble. He knows those who take refuge in him.

But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness. What do you plot against the Lord? He will make a complete end. Trouble will not rise up a second time, for they are like entangled thorns, like drunkards as they drink.

They are consumed like stubble fully dried. From you came one who plotted evil against the Lord, a worthless counsellor. Thus says the Lord, though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away.

Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you, and will burst your bonds apart. 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 carved image and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile.

Behold upon the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace. Keep your feasts, O Judah. Fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you.

He is utterly cut off. Nahum the seventh prophet of the book of the twelve is a seventh century prophetic book written by a Judean prophet foretelling the downfall of Nineveh. However, despite its most immediate concern with Nineveh, explicit reference to Nineveh is rare within the text.

Thomas Renz notes that there are only two such references in the entire book, in chapter two verse eight and chapter three verse seven. One of the effects of this reticence in naming Nineveh and Assyria is that the universal relevance of the message of the book is more clearly seen. As Brevia Charles has argued, especially within their context within the biblical canon, prophecies can often exhibit a degree of abstraction from the immediacy of their original historical context.

They speak across times to people in very different situations. For instance, within the book of the twelve we can see the exploration of broader eschatological themes, such as the day of the Lord, even while the immediate instance of judgment being focused upon can vary. In dating the book of Nahum, as Daniel Timmer argues, we have two key dates between which we can date the book.

The downfall of Thebes is referenced in chapter three verse eight, as this occurred at the hands of Assyria in 663 BC, the book must be dated some time before that. The downfall of Nineveh itself in 612 BC, at the hands of the rising power of Babylon, is the obvious second temporal reference. The prophecy also seems to have been delivered at a time of greater Assyrian power, probably nearer to the earlier date of the downfall of Thebes than the later date of the downfall of Nineveh.

The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Sennacherib had come up against Jerusalem in 701 BC and nearly defeated it. While he had failed in this, he had defeated 46 fortified cities of Judah.

The prophet Jonah addressed a context about 100 years earlier. Assyria was a brutal power and had greatly harmed Israel and Judah, wiping out the former kingdom and bringing the latter to its knees and reducing it to vassal status. Judah's power was much diminished during this period.

It lost territory, cities and many men to the Assyrians. However, Assyria's days were numbered. A new power was about to dominate in the north.

After the death of Assurbanipal, the Neo-Assyrian empire went into decline. The Babylonians successfully revolted against their rule. Assur fell to Median forces in 614 BC, then Nineveh to Median and Babylonian forces in 612.

Haran fell in 609 BC and then in 605 BC the Babylonians would defeat the Egyptians and the remnants of the Assyrian forces in Carchemish, spelling the end of the Egyptian power in the region and the establishment of the Babylonian hegemony, which would last for around the next 70 years. Beyond the very slight details that we receive at the beginning of the book, we lack further biographical data concerning Nahum. We don't know anything for certain about the identity of Elkush, for instance.

It might be a clan name or it might be a place name. Commentators have several different speculative suggestions for its referent, of varying degrees of likelihood. We don't know the king or the kings during whose reign Nahum prophesied.

Manasseh, Ammon and Josiah were the kings during the relevant period. Manasseh was distinguished for the extent of his idolatry and his perversion of the religious life of Judah. After the brief reign of his son Ammon, also renowned for his idolatry and wickedness, Josiah, a godly reforming king, came to the throne around 640 BC.

While Nahum's prophecy concerns Nineveh, it is directed to Judah, or perhaps more specifically to the faithful within that nation. It is possible that it was also delivered to Assyrians, but quite likely that it never was. Nahum's proclamation of the coming downfall of the Assyrians, while they were still the dominant power in the region, might have surprised many of his hearers.

However, the message was a reminder of the Lord's sovereignty over the nations. Timur draws our attention to the presence of an acrostic, where the first and last letters of the lines from the second half of verse 1 to halfway through verse 3 spell out the Hebrew for I with the first letters and Yahweh with the last letters. There is a further acrostic pattern that Timur identifies in verses 2 to 8 with a partial yet broken acrostic following the first half of the Hebrew alphabet at the start of successive lines.

Renz notes that some scholars dispute the presence of an acrostic here, however he does not find their arguments compelling, believing that the elements of the pattern that we do see would be unlikely to arise merely by chance. Timur suggests that the broken character of the acrostic is possibly designed to give a sense of incompleteness. The final resolution has yet to arrive.

The prophecy of Nahum begins by grounding its message in the Lord's own character, referring to some of the most important historical witnesses that the Lord gave to himself in the Ten Commandments and in the Theophany given to Moses in the aftermath of the sin with the golden calf. The acrostic in the opening verses, which yields I am Yahweh, makes good contextual sense when we consider that the verses that follow are developing those statements in which the Lord declares his name to his people. Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me, and keep my commandments.

In Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. Significantly, the book of Jonah also reflected upon Exodus chapter 34 as Jonah referenced the Lord's declaration of his name and gave the Lord's relenting from disaster as a reason for his desire to flee to Tarshish in chapter 4 verse 2 And he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Jonah had quoted the Lord's declaration in a way that foregrounded the elements of the Lord's self-revelation that focused upon forgiveness and the passing over of iniquity, purposefully downplaying elements of judgment.

Micah also concludes with a reflection upon the statements of the Lord concerning his identity in chapter 7 verses 18 to 20 of his prophecy Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us. He will tread our iniquities underfoot.

You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old. Considering the unity of the book of the twelve and the way that three successive prophets within it, Jonah, Micah and Nahum, contain contrasting reflections upon Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6 and chapter 34 verses 6 to 7 might lend support to the idea

that they have been ordered as they have within the book of the twelve precisely in order to foreground this theme for the hearers.

The fact that Nahum focuses upon the dimension of judgment and downplays the dimension of forgiveness is all the more interesting by contrast with Jonah and Micah's reflections upon it, within both of which grace and forgiveness is foregrounded, albeit in very different ways. As the jealous God, the Lord has a love that will not tolerate rivalry or dispossession. He will not let his people go.

He will not give his glory to another. The Lord's relationship with his people must be exclusive. The Lord's enduring wrath against his enemies could be seen as a corollary of his enduring love for his people.

God's judgment is not merely the application of an abstract system of punishments and rewards, but is relational, driven by love, by wrath and by jealousy. Yet the Lord's wrath and jealousy is not like the fickleness and volatility of human passions. The Lord is slow to anger and his wrath endures.

He does not shift with passing moods. The power of the Lord is accented in the theophanic imagery that is introduced from the end of verse 3. The theophanic imagery in this passage should be familiar to us from elsewhere in scripture, Isaiah chapter 66 verses 15 to 16 for instance. Psalm 18 verses 6 to 15.

And the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. The advent of the Lord unsettles the entire creation. It rocks the world on its foundations.

When the Lord comes on the scene, things that once seemed secure and firm are weakened and they melt. This is the power that he manifested in the original creation. But it is also seen in the great deliverances of Israel's history, especially the founding event of the Red Sea crossing.

No one is able to resist or stand before it. All creation shrinks away. The boundaries drawn in the original creation no longer hold.

The sea is dried up and an overflowing flood engulfs the land. The Lord decisively ends all rebellion, manifesting its utter futility and stupidity, consuming adversaries like dry stubble. However, in the midst of this tumult and storm, there is a calm eye.

The steadfast goodness of the Lord and the security that he provides to all who take refuge in him. Verse 11 seems to be a bridge between the two sections, the one that proceeds in verses 1-10 and the one that follows in verses 12-14. The natural question that arises is whom is being addressed? Is this addressed to Jerusalem? If it's a reference to Jerusalem, then maybe it's a reference to Sennacherib's departure from Jerusalem in 701 BC.

However, it seems more likely that this is a reference to Nineveh, with the one plotting evil against the Lord, the worthless counsellor, referring to Nineveh's king. In verses 12-14, the Lord speaks concerning the judgement that will come upon Nineveh. It currently looks as if Nineveh and the Assyrians are at their full strength.

However, in no more than a few decades, Nineveh and the Assyrians will be cut off. At the height of the Assyrians' power, Judah had been greatly afflicted by them, and the Lord had been behind all of this. The Assyrians were the axe of the Lord's anger that was raised against his people.

But now he declares that he would break the yoke of the Assyrians and deliver his people from it. The Lord speaks directly to the Assyrians and to Nineveh in verse 14. Their name and their idols would be cut off, and as a nation they would be brought down to the grave.

The Lord here describes them as vile, perhaps on account of their extreme brutality. The concluding verse of the chapter, verse 15, describes the joy that comes with the messenger of Nineveh's downfall. With the news of Assyria's collapse comes the promise of peace and a resurgence of hope for the people.

Renz draws attention to the extensive festivities of the Passover of the 18th year of Josiah's reign. As the power of Assyria waned, faithful Israelites were freed to feast and to celebrate. An interesting and important feature of this verse is its close resemblance to Isaiah chapter 52, verse 7. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns.

Scholars debate the relative priority of these prophecies in Nahum and Isaiah. As he is introduced to us, Isaiah is an 8th century prophet and Nahum a 7th century prophet. If we believe that the prophet Isaiah was the author of the entirety of the book that bears his name, then that seems to settle the question.

Unless of course both Isaiah and Nahum were drawing upon a third source, perhaps some lines from a well-known liturgy. In the book of Isaiah, the good news seems to be the breaking of the yoke of Babylon. In Nahum, it's the earlier news of the breaking of the yoke of Assyria.

Renz writes, If Isaiah chapter 52 came first, we are invited to see the fall of Nineveh as a first installment of the end of exile. If Nahum came first, as argued here, the end of the Babylonian exile is a further instance of, I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. A question to consider.

Comparing and contrasting the reflections upon Exodus chapter 20, verses 5-6 and chapter 34, verses 6-7, in Jonah chapter 4, verse 2, in Micah chapter 7, verses 18-20 and

at the beginning of this chapter, what deeper aspects of their meaning might come to light? Matthew chapter 9, verses 18-34 While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in, and knelt before him, saying, My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live. And Jesus rose and followed him with his disciples. And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years, came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment.

For she said to herself, If I only touch his garment, I will be made well. Jesus turned, and seeing her, he said, Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well. And instantly the woman was made well.

And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, Go away, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping. And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose.

And the report of this went through all that district. And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, Have mercy on us, son of David. When he entered the house, the blind men came to him.

And Jesus said to them, Do you believe that I am able to do this? They said to him, Yes, Lord. Then he touched their eyes, saying, According to your faith be it done to you. And their eyes were opened.

And Jesus sternly warned them, See that no one knows about it. But they went away and spread his fame through all that district. As they were going away, behold, a demon-oppressed man who was mute was brought to him.

And when the demon had been cast out, the mute man spoke. And the crowds marvelled, saying, Never was anything like this seen in Israel. But the Pharisees said, He casts out demons by the prince of demons.

In this section of Matthew 9 we reach the conclusion of the series of ten miracles or signs that Jesus performs. Here we have a number of events hot on the heels of each other, one thing after another, and in the case of the woman with the issue of blood and the girl restored to life, mixed up together. Jesus has just been identified as the Bridegroom, but now there is the healing of two women.

These are two entangled events, even more so in Luke, where not only has the woman been suffering from her condition for twelve years, a detail that we have here, but the girl is twelve years old too. That number suggests a connection between both characters and Israel. Now, both characters connected with Israel being women, and Christ having just been identified as the Bridegroom, it might suggest that there is something more going on here.

Christ is the one that comes to deliver the bride and to raise daughter Jerusalem to new life. Jesus is asked by the ruler here to come and visit his daughter and lay his hand on her so that she might be delivered from death. This is a grand request.

This is not something that Christ has been asked to do to this point, to deliver someone from death itself. This is a more climactic sign or action. Jesus is going to deliver Israel from its death, daughter Zion, raise her up to new life.

But as he's going on the way, he's interrupted, and he's interrupted by a woman who's suffered from this discharge of blood, and she touches the hem of Jesus' garment. Now, the hem of the garment was an important part of the garment because it was the part of the garment that had the tassels on. And those tassels had a symbolic significance given to them within the book of Numbers.

In chapter 15, verse 37, the Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments and be holy to your God.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God. And this law connected the garments of Israel with the garments of the high priest, and the garments of the high priest were in turn connected with the tabernacle as a sort of house as garment.

The high priest had these sorts of blue tassels on his garment, and now Israel also have those as well. And those tassels connect their garments to the meaning of the high priest as one who represents Israel's holy status to the Lord. And every Israelite was supposed to have that represented on their garments.

Jesus' garments are significant. They represent his office, they represent his person. We can see this in the transfiguration where there is a transfiguration of the garments, not just of Christ himself.

His garments are taken from him at the crucifixion. He's stripped of his garments. He's wrapped in linen clothes and laid in the tomb.

He's wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger. And in other occasions we read about his garments. His garments are clearly significant for representing what's happening to him and who he is.

Here as life flows into the woman and heals her of her ailment, we see that Christ himself is the source of life. She has an issue of blood. He has an issue of life.

Life flows out of him and it gives life to others. You could maybe think about the blue tassels as like rivers out of Eden, like the rivers that are connected with the living water in the book of John. Jesus is the one who gives life.

Life flows from him. There's also the fact that within the Old Testament the wing of the garment was connected with marriage. To take the woman under the wing was to take her as your wife.

And Jesus has the wing of his garment touched by this woman which suggests again that the bridal themes that have been playing just beforehand have not ceased. They're still important. There's something incongruous within this setting.

We have the flute players. Now why mention the flute players? They're not mentioned in the other Gospel accounts. It's a strange detail to include.

And the flute players seem to be out of keeping with the character of the event. They are playing this music that seems to be more appropriate for a dance than for a funeral. And Christ moves them away.

A few chapters further in Matthew I think we might have a clue to the meaning of this. In Matthew chapter 11 verse 16 Jesus says, But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

Within that passage we have many of the same themes that we've seen in this passage come up again. And again there is this incongruity that's highlighted. The flute that's being played and people not dancing.

The dirge and people not mourning. And the flute here is connected with dancing, which seems a strange thing to have at a funeral. But in some sense the incongruity is appropriate because Jesus is the bridegroom come to the scene.

He's the bridegroom that's released the woman from her ailment when she touched his garment, the hem of his garment. And now he's the one that's going to raise daughter Israel to life. So these wedding and dirge themes collide.

The flute players are acting in a way that's out of keeping with what's taken place, the death of a young girl. But there's a level of irony here because Jesus is acting in a way that actually is more appropriate to flute playing. Jesus is the one who's bringing in new life.

He's the one who's the bridegroom that's come on the scene. And at the end of this miracle, as in the other ones within this series of miracles, Jesus' fame spreads. People in the surrounding regions are starting to hear about who this man Jesus is and his fame and reputation is starting to spread.

Following this, Jesus heals two blind men. And once again, this involves persistent faith. Jesus does not heal straight away.

He presents obstacles to these blind men to prove their faith. They stubbornly persist and as they persist, they are healed. Their sight is restored and even though they're instructed not to do so, they spread the fame of Jesus even further throughout that district.

Once again, there's a connection between this miracle and the miracle that immediately succeeds. The miracles come in rapid succession, one thing after another, and often without one thing being finished, the next begins. Jesus is acting in a way that has an urgency and a speed and a suddenness to it.

And reading through this section, it's important that we have some sense of the urgency and the speed with which things are happening. Things are happening with a rapidity that suggests something about the Kingdom of God itself. And as he's going away, behold, a demon-possessed man whose mute is brought to him.

Once again, this is someone who's being brought to him for healing. We've seen a number of cases of this so far. Jesus is often requested to heal someone on behalf of someone else.

This is a further reminder that Jesus works with groups of people, not just isolated individuals each having faith for themselves. Jesus is healing and delivering people as they are brought by others to him. Pray for your friends, pray for people in your family, pray for people in your neighbourhood, pray for people who may not be able to come to Christ themselves because Christ works through other people bringing people to him.

The condition of the demon-possessed man could perhaps be compared to that of Israel. Israel, wherever Jesus goes, he sees Israel oppressed by demons, even in the synagogues themselves. You could maybe think back to the story of David and Saul.

David is anointed by the spirit and an evil spirit troubles and oppresses Saul. But then David goes to Saul and brings him relief as he plays for him. Jesus is going throughout Israel and he's bringing relief as the man of the spirit, as the son of David, to a nation that's oppressed by Satan.

The Pharisees, however, accuse Jesus, accusing him of one of the worst things of all. They say that he is acting by the power of Satan, an accusation that aligns Christ with the one whose very works he is going to give everything to destroy. This is an accusation

beyond all accusations.

It's an accusation that declares Christ to be the absolute opposite of what he actually is. A question to consider. In chapters 8 and 9 of the book of Matthew, Jesus is going through a series of actions.

Actions and healings, exorcisms and miracles. These actions, as they occur, serve to highlight who Jesus is. They serve to illustrate the character of the kingdom.

They serve to describe the spread of Christ's reputation. And they also serve to highlight the opposition that Jesus is facing. The accusation that arises at the end of it highlights just how sharp the division between Christ and the Pharisees has become.

Exploring this series of actions on these different fronts, what are some of the things that most stand out to you about the development that Matthew has highlighted between the end of the Sermon on the Mount and the beginning of the sending out of the twelve disciples?