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September 11th: Nahum 2 & Matthew 9:35—10:23

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The downfall of Nineveh. Sending out the twelve apostles.

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Transcript

Nahum chapter 2. The scatterer has come up against you. Man the ramparts, watch the road, dress for battle, collect all your strength. For the Lord is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel.

For plunderers have plundered them and ruined their branches. The shield of his mighty men is red, his soldiers are clothed in scarlet. The chariots come with flashing metal on the day he musters them.

The cypress spears are brandished. The chariots race madly through the streets. They rush to and fro through the squares.

They gleam like torches, they dart like lightning. He remembers his officers. They stumble as they go.

They hasten to the wall. The siege tower is set up. The river gates are opened.

The palace melts away. Its mistress is stripped. She is carried off, her slave girls lamenting, moaning like doves and beating their breasts.

Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. Halt, halt, they cry, but none turns back. Plunder the silver, plunder the gold.

There is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things. Desolate, desolation and ruin. Hearts melt and knees tremble.

Anguish is in all loins. All faces grow pale. Where is the lion's den? The feeding place of the young lions, where the lion and lioness went, where his cubs were, with none to disturb.

The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses. He filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh. Behold, I am against you, declares the lord of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke and the sword shall devour your young lions.

I will cut off your prey from the earth and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard. Nahum chapter 2 continues the prophetic warning of the lord's approaching judgment upon Nineveh, vividly describing the manner of its downfall and the aftermath of its ruin. The chapter begins with the alarm.

The scatterer has come up against Nineveh. It's an army of Medes and Babylonians advancing against it and all must ready themselves for battle. Soldiers must man their various stations and brace themselves for the coming onslaught.

The verses that follow dramatically portray the movement of the army up to Nineveh, through the streets of the city's suburbs, up to its wall, their breaching of the citadel and their despoiling of its palace and temple. And then the plunder of the victors and the unspeakable anguish of the defeated Assyrians in the ruins and the wreckage that remains. This passage refers to the downfall of the city of in 612 BC at the hands of a Median and Babylonian army.

Rather than merely telling us what's going to happen, it paints a picture for us, an arresting portrayal in snapshots and cutscenes of how the downfall of Nineveh will appear. The rapidity of the movement is expressed through curt imperatives, from the way in which the imagery moves swiftly from the beginning of the battle to its aftermath. The action against Nineveh is also an action for Jacob.

The relationship between the expression, the majesty of Jacob and the majesty of Israel here, might allude back to the story of the Lord's wrestling with Jacob in Genesis chapter 32 as Daniel Timmer suggests. There Jacob had received the name Israel and a blessing from the Lord. Alternatively this could be a reference to the restoration of the territory of Judah and Israel.

There was now the hope of reclaiming territory that had formerly been lost to the Assyrians. This restoration of Jacob is those who had plundered them are themselves

plundered. The description starting in verse 3 works heavily with visual imagery.

In verse 3 it's the colours, the red of the shield, presumably leather shields, and the clothing of the soldiers in scarlet. The colour of the shields and of the soldiers reminds us of the fact that these are coming for blood. Chariots, presumably those of the invading army, are racing through the streets of Nineveh.

The suburbs outside the citadel walls had wide streets down which chariots could race. The great city is being overrun and its citadel surrounded. Timmer helpfully describes the city of Nineveh at this time.

The 7th century BCE city of Nineveh proper consisted of a central walled area roughly 5 kilometres or 3 miles long and averaging 1 kilometre 0.65 miles in width. The palace, other royal buildings, temples and relatively wealthy residential areas were located within this area which was surrounded by an immense stone wall roughly 15 metres or 50 feet thick and 20 metres or 65 feet high. This main wall was pierced by at least 15 gates, 18 are attested in written sources but not all have been positively located, some of which were 5 to 7 metres 16 to 23 feet wide before being narrowed in the years leading up to 612 BCE and all were easily accessed by stone ramps.

Further, at two points the river Khosr ran under the city's wall and on its course through the city ran close enough to the royal palace that Sennacherib built a river wall to protect the citadel on which the palace was built from erosion. Verse 5 likely refers to the king of Nineveh summoning his officers to the wall, they stumble to get there in time and yet despite their efforts the siege towers are set up and the wall is breached. Many have speculated on the grounds of verse 6 and what we know of the river works around the city of Nineveh that water played some part in the city's downfall.

Some ancient Greek historical accounts such as that of Xenophon may lend support to this although the Babylonian accounts of the fall of the city which were nearer to the event itself do not mention a flood or the involvement of water. Considering the proximity of the river to the palace in the city it is possible that if some of the infrastructure were destroyed that the foundations of the palace might have been undermined by the influx of water into the city. There is no reason why we have to take the imagery that way however, such imagery as we see elsewhere in scripture is often used to describe an overwhelming force.

As the citadel is breached the palace is overthrown and also the temple of the city is overthrown. Verse 7 likely describes the despoiling of the temple of Ishtar and the carrying away of her statue. Nineveh is compared to a pool whose banks have been breached so that all of its water flows away.

Nineveh is hemorrhaging its forces and commanders and officials can't summon them back to their posts. In the aftermath of the destruction the plunderers are themselves

plundered, stripped of all that they had gained from others and left utterly desolate. In verses 11 and 12 the former glories of Nineveh are compared to a lion's den, a place for the pride and the young lions, a place that no one would dare approach and a place that was utterly secure.

It was the place to which the lion brought and in which he devoured his prey. But now the place where the lion was once at his most secure has been overcome. No more can he gather his prey within the den of Nineveh.

Nineveh is no more. In the final verse of the chapter the lord declares his challenge to Nineveh. He is going to destroy the Assyrian war machine which had been based upon the power of the chariot.

He is going to devour their young lions. The strength of their nation, the royalty, officials and warriors are going to be devoured by the sword. Their predatory activities will be put to a halt and their voices of victory will be silenced.

A question to consider, how does the lord's vengeance upon Nineveh restore the majesty of Jacob? Matthew chapter 9 verse 35 to chapter 10 verse 23. And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few therefore pray earnestly to the lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these.

First Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother. James the son of Zebedee and John his brother. Philip and Bartholomew.

Thomas and Matthew the tax collector. James the son of Alpheus and Thaddeus. Simon the zealot and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out instructing them go nowhere among the gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and proclaim as you go saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand heal the sick raise the dead cleanse lepers cast out demons you receive without paying give without pay acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts no bag for your journey or two tunics or sandals or a staff for the labourer deserves his food and whatever town or village you enter find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart as you enter the house greet it and if the house is worthy let your peace come upon it but if it is not worthy let your peace

return to you and if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town truly i say to you it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town behold i'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves beware of men for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake to bear witness before them and the gentiles when they deliver you over do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour for it is not you who speak but the spirit of your father speaking through you brother will deliver brother over to death and the father his child and children will rise against parents and have them put to death and you will be hated by all for my name's sake but the one who endures to the end will be saved when they persecute you in one town flee to the next for truly i say to you you will not have gone through all the towns of israel before the son of man comes at the end of Matthew chapter 9 our passage is introduced by the fact that Jesus is going through all the cities and the villages teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom healing diseases and afflictions the good news is that God is establishing his reign the crowds however are like sheep without a shepherd this description is one that can be found in the old testament in first kings chapter 22 verse 17 as a result of a rout in battle israel is described as like sheep without shepherds on the mountains a more significant parallel can be found in numbers chapter 27 verses 16 to 18 where moses says to the lord let the lord the god of the spirits of all flesh appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them who shall lead them out and bring them in that the congregation of the lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd so the lord said to moses take joshua the son of nun a man in whom is the spirit and lay your hand on him in a similar way christ will go on to appoint 12 disciples to ensure that israel is not left as sheep without a shepherd he will send out under shepherds to guide these cities and these villages that he's been going through a further important piece of old testament background can be found in ezekiel chapter 34 verses 2 to 6 and then verses 11 to 16 their god condemns the false shepherds of israel the ones who have not been faithful who have left the people as if they are without a shepherd and then he says that he will be their shepherd he will search for and restore the lost sheep and he will bring them out and gather them from the various countries and bring them into their own land he's going to feed them he's going to heal those that are injured he's going to protect them from predators and he's going to judge the unfaithful having gone through the cities and towns jesus has seen the spiritual state of israel and in one respect they're like sheep without a shepherd on the other hand there's a plentiful harvest but not enough people to go out and to reap and labor within it and so jesus is preparing people as shepherds but also people to do the work of harvesters moses gave authority to joshua to lead the people and jesus now gives authority to the 12 to carry out a mission throughout the land all that jesus has just demonstrated in his actions in the last two chapters which arguably restored a group of 12 people he is commissioning his 12 disciples to perform

the harvest is ready it's time for division to occur it's time for shepherds to be given to the lost sheep to restore them to heal them to rescue them and the 12 are laborers for the harvest and shepherds for the flock they are to continue the work that Jesus has started according to the pattern that he has shown the description that he gives them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction draws our mind back to chapter 4 verse 23 where it says and he went throughout all Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people this is the same thing that Christ has now he's commissioning his disciples to do the same it's important that he chooses 12 they are 12 patriarchs for a restored Israel at the beginning of the book of Numbers in Numbers chapter 1 verses 1 to 16 there is the choice of 12 men to assist Moses one from each of the tribes now the 12 here are not a substitute for or a replacement for Israel rather they are the seed of a new Israel within the life of the old and there's going to be a new Israel gathered around them as Israel is reformed and revitalized the 12 are listed here they're also listed in Mark chapter 3 16 to 18 in Luke 6 14 to 16 and in Acts 1 verse 13 the ordering of the 12 is worth paying attention to Peter has primacy Peter we're told is first and that first is not merely that he's the first to be called or that he is the first to be listed in an arbitrary ordering rather in the listings of the apostles he is always the first he is the one that has the most significant and honored role he's the one that leads the apostles on the day of Pentecost in the mission to the Gentiles he also leads the way on the Council of Jerusalem and on a number of other occasions he is the most prominent apostle and he's the one who leads the church in a particular way now this doesn't mean that we have to hold a Roman Catholic view of the primacy of Peter as the first pope but I do think it means that we should accept that Peter was the leader of the apostles he was the first among them the last of the apostles is always listed in the same way it's the one with the least honor it's Judas who spoiler alert would betray him may be worth noting at this point that Scripture has no problem whatsoever spoiling the narrative ahead telling us what's about to come we may be used to reading stories for the first time but Scripture is not written for the first time reader it's written primarily for people who are reading it again and again and again and as a result it's constantly calling forward to events that will happen in the future it's presuming knowledge of the end of the story even in the middle of the story because most people who are reading it are expected to be reading it for the fourth fifth sixth seventh hundredth time Matthew is the only one whose vocation is given here and there are differences in the way that the apostles are treated in different gospels Thomas and Philip are prominent within the Gospel of John in a way that they're not within the Synoptics Simon the Zealot um probably is a reference not to some sort of political revolutionary work that he was involved in or had previously been involved in but to the fact that he was a man characterized by zeal perhaps we should see in those cases where some other name is attached to the apostle or there is some relation or some vocation that's attached to them just the commonality of that particular name that they had so Simon was a common name so he needed to be distinguished from others by

being a zealot or by being called peter james had to be distinguished by being the son of alpheus and there are other sorts of distinctions that needed to be made not just within the group of the apostles themselves like there's two jameses and there's two simons but also within the larger group of disciples and within people of those days that can be one of the things that helps us to realize the authenticity of the gospels the fact that the names that are common within the gospels were also common within the other records that we have from that period and that location one interesting feature of this particular list that we do not find in the other lists in luke and mark is that they're ordered in twos this presumably was because the apostles were sent out in twos we see that in the other gospels it's not mentioned here but they're ordered in twos before they're being sent out might also explain why andrew occurs in parallel with peter his brother whereas in others he might seem to come in the fourth position after james and john who with peter comprised the three at the heart of the disciples jesus sends the disciples out to the towns and cities of israel in some respects what he's doing is not dissimilar from a politician on a campaign trail he's raising grassroots support he's making people aware of his larger mission and when the time comes there will be a people ready to receive it however we could also compare what he's doing to the sending out of the spies who go throughout the land in twos preparing for a future conquest we see that in numbers chapter 13 and as they go throughout the land they present a test of hospitality they must depend upon the generosity of others and this will be the test we see that they do not have supplies for the journey they do not have the means to protect themselves they do not have the means to clothe themselves and house themselves they're dependent upon other people and in the same way as rahab was tested and blessed as a result of her reception of the spies so the people of israel are being tested in preparation for a new conquest we see this test of hospitality in the book of genesis in genesis chapter 18 three angels one of them being the lord come incognito to abraham and he greets them and welcomes them and shows them great hospitality and is blessed as a result of on the other hand the next chapter in chapter 19 those two angels come to sodom and sodom is judged as a result of their failure to receive them in the right way and so this testing of the land through a test of hospitality is an important theme within scripture and christ uses it on various occasions we see it again in chapter 25 when christ comes incognito in his brothers and those who do not receive them are judged those who do receive them are blessed beyond the fact that they must depend upon other people's hospitality they must be confident in god's generous provision god is the one that's going to provide everything that they need for this journey they don't have enough of their own resources they're being sent out into the most dangerous circumstances without provision and they must depend wholly upon god's goodness towards them they are told that it would be worse for the cities that reject them than for the cities of sodom and gomorrah on the day of judgment and again this draws our mind back to the test of hospitality that was presented to sodom and gomorrah they are presenting another test of hospitality and the judgment that follows this is going to be even more severe they're sent to the lost sheep of the house of israel not to the gentiles yet but to the flock of the

firstborn nation of israel the nation that's supposed to lead the others they are to be shepherds but they are also themselves sheep sheep sent out in the midst of wolves but sent out in the midst of wolves under the rule of a greater shepherd the shepherd that is promised in ezekiel chapter 34 where god says that he himself will shepherd his people their defenselessness and their dependence is a sign of their sheep-like character and the success of their mission is a sign of the greater shepherd that's overseeing it their reliance upon the good shepherd they are sheep sent out in the midst of wolves but under the rule of a shepherd who will snatch them away from any that will try and harm them they need to be shrewd but innocent they will have to use their cunning trickery wit and deception to survive and escape from oppressors and opponents can maybe think about david fleeing from saul they will be persecuted hated abused and brought before rulers and kings they'll live in treacherous times where even those closest family members and friends might turn on them it's important to remember that the group of disciples aren't just random individuals and many of them are closely related probably at least three of them are first cousins of jesus james and john the sons of zebedee and james the son of alpheus james the son of alpheus according to tradition and james and john according to piecing together some of the details concerning the women who are at the cross other disciples like simon peter and andrew are brothers themselves and within the group of the apostles we can probably expect that there were further first cousins or second cousins and people who have grown up around each other will work together james and john and peter and andrew presumably knew each other very well working alongside each other and so this was a tight-knit group of people with a tight-knit family network around them and so when family started to turn on them it would be an incredibly difficult thing something that would strike at the very dynamics at the heart of their group their group was developed out of the life of families and the sort of connections that exist between young males who work together and associate together within a particular region this is not just isolated people these are people who are tied together by familial and friendship and kinship bonds perhaps the nearest modern analogy we have for it is something like a mafia family where within a mafia family there are interplays between the biological family and the family that is the fictive kinship of the criminal group in these sorts of relationships there is an intertwining of the two in complicated ways and betrayal has a particular force within contexts like that where the tensions between the fictive family group the larger family group and the more intimate biological family group can be felt incredibly keenly and can be very bitter they are told that even when they are brought before kings and rulers they are not to worry about their defense just as god will provide them with provisions on the way he will provide them with the words that they need for their defense and these words will be given to them by the spirit once again this is presumably anticipating events later on in the story when the spirit will be given in the events of the day of pentecost they will still be going through the cities of israel when the son of man returns now this return of the son of man is presumably at the end of that particular period of time in ad 70 when there will be judgment upon israel and they are leading up to that judgment preparing the people

there's an event of judgment and harvest on the horizon and they need to get the people prepared they need to lead the sheep away from danger and they need to prepare the division of this nation into those who are faithful and those who are unfaithful a question to consider christians can talk a lot about hospitality evangelism about the importance of opening our homes to others and showing them generous hospitality and giving them good food place to stay these sorts of things these things are very good but we don't talk very much about a test of hospitality about the importance of requesting other people's hospitality or putting ourselves at the mercy of other people's hospitality reading this passage and the associated passage in matthew 25 concerning the sheep and the goats can you think of any ways in which christ might be calling us to practice tests of hospitality in our contexts