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September 12th: Nahum 3 & Matthew 10:24-42

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The justice of Nineveh's overthrow. The lot of the disciple.

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Transcript

Nahum chapter 3 Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder, no end to the prey. The crack of the whip and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot, horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end, they stumble over the bodies. And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings and peoples with her charms.

Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts. I will lift up your skirts over your face and will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle.

And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, wasted is Nineveh, who will grieve for her? Where shall I seek comforters for you? Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her, her rampart a sea, and water her wall? Cush was her strength, Egypt too, and that without limit. Put and the Libyans were her helpers, yet she became an exile, she went into captivity. Her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street, for her honoured men lots were cast, and all her great men were bound

in chains.

You also will be drunken, you will go into hiding, you will seek a refuge from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with first ripe figs, if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater. Behold, your troops are women in your midst, the gates of your land are wide open to your enemies, fire has devoured your bars.

Draw water for the siege, strengthen your forts, go into the clay, tread the mortar, take hold of the brick mould. There will the fire devour you, the sword will cut you off, it will devour you like the locust. Multiply your souls like the locust, multiply like the grasshopper.

You increased your merchants more than the stars of the heavens, the locust spreads its wings and flies away. Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold. When the sun rises they fly away, no one knows where they are.

Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria, your nobles slumber, your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them. There is no easing your hurt, your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you, for upon whom has not come your unceasing evil.

The coming downfall of Nineveh and the Neo-Assyrian Empire has been the subject of the entirety of the Book of Nahum. Treatment of this continues in Nahum chapter 3, the final chapter of the book. Within the chapter Nineveh and Assyria are ridiculed for the humiliation of their hubris and the collapse of their former cruel might.

The chapter opens with an oracle of woe, within which the causes of the destruction of the city of Nineveh are presented. Nineveh was the heart of a cruel, violent and bloodthirsty empire which ravaged other nations through treacherous political schemes and its despoiling of and exacting of vast sums in tribute from its foes. Now, however, the Lord's judgment has come upon it.

Verses 2 and 3 could be taken as a description either of the army of the Medes and Babylonians that is coming up against Nineveh, as in the preceding chapter, or as a depiction of the brutal power that Nineveh and the Assyrians once represented. It's more likely that it represents the latter, flashes of sight and sound evocatively characterising the violent and bloody force of Assyria and its war machine, much as in the depiction of the Medo-Babylonian army overwhelming Nineveh in the preceding chapter. In verse 2 we see the chariots of Assyria in their din and rapid motion, a blur of thundering metal and the snorting of warhorses.

This terse, staccato and kinetic portrayal of the Assyrian army continues in verse 3, where we also see the carnage left in its wake, the heaped corpses that were a matter of

pride for the brutal Assyrians. Assyria is compared to a prostitute, deceitfully drawing in other nations by its wiles, yet proving treacherous and perverse. Nineveh was a place of idolatry and sorcery.

The Lord would defile her, humiliating her before the nations that she had once cruelly dominated in her might. We encounter similar depictions of Jerusalem at key points in the Prophets, for instance in Jeremiah chapter 13 verses 26 to 27, where the same shocking imagery of lifting up the adulteress's skirts over her face is used. The point of this action is exposure, the manifestation of once hidden sin, the humiliation of the former haughtiness of the wicked, and rendering former oppressors vulnerable.

Another similar statement is found in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 36 to 38. Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 36 to 38 The stripping of the prostitute in public humiliation is here used to illustrate the shaming of Nineveh in the eyes of the surrounding nations, who had formerly been terrorized by her. The uncovering of her nakedness would be a cathartic spectacle for those who had formerly suffered at her hands.

Finally delivered from her terror and her thrall, the contempt of all of the nations for Assyria would be revealed. Nineveh considered itself impregnable and inviolable, but the Lord reminds Nineveh of the great Egyptian city of Thebes, which despite its military strength, its fortifications, its key alliances, and its location in the south of Egypt, had fallen to Asobanipal in 663 BC. Over the period prior to 663 BC, Assyria had steadily been extending its dominance over regions formerly under Egyptian hegemony.

This had provoked Egyptian Levantine campaigns in response. After an earlier failed invasion, in 671 BC, Esau Haddan made a successful assault upon Egypt itself, taking Memphis and beginning a period of Assyrian dominance in the region. In 663, his successor Asobanipal took the city of Thebes, a city that would formerly have been considered absolutely secure.

Nahum describes Thebes in a manner that invites comparisons with Nineveh, not least by describing the place that water had and its infrastructure and defences. Although Assyria had brought down Thebes, Nineveh, the centre of Assyria's own might, would suffer a similar fate. Nineveh is reminded of the violence that it had employed against Thebes.

It would soon be at the receiving end of such brutality. Assyria may not realise it, but it is ripe for destruction. One could imagine someone objecting to Nahum's message here, saying that the sacking of the mighty Thebes was a strange thing to mention here, as it was achieved by the very Assyrian forces that he is declaring will suffer a similar fate.

Surely the case of Thebes suggests that the power of Assyria is overwhelming. Yet the parallel is still drawn, in part because the determining factor is not ultimately human military might, as we will see in the verses that follow, but the sovereign judgements of

the Lord. Before those, no human forces can stand.

Nineveh, in a familiar image of judgement, would be intoxicated, presumably with the wine of divine judgement, and would collapse. Assyria trusts in its power, its troops, its fortifications and its gates. Yet the message of Nahum is that all of these are ultimately powerless to protect her.

Nahum compares the fortresses of the Assyrians to fig trees with first ripe figs. You need only shake them a little and you will have figs falling down upon you, ready to be devoured. Despite their appearance of strength, the strongholds of the Assyrians are ripe for destruction.

In addition to their strongholds, the Assyrians would have trusted in the might of their army. And yet in verse 13 we are told that their military might would become like women, a much weakened force, insufficient to defend itself, or anyone else for that matter. The same thing is true of their defences.

Although the great gates of Nineveh might seem to be impregnable, for all the good that they will do in protecting the city from the Lord's judgement, they might as well be left wide open, the bars utterly destroyed by fire. In verses 14 and 15, the Prophet gives a taunt against the city. He rallies them to prepare for the coming battle.

They must draw water for the siege, ensuring that they have enough water for when they are surrounded by their enemies. To reinforce their fortifications, they must prepare bricks. And so they get clay for the bricks, they prepare the mortar, and they get the brick mould ready to form the bricks within it.

However, the process is not finished. Before the preparations have been made, they will be devoured by fire, cut off by the sword. They are compared to locusts about to be devoured, and that image is picked up and expanded in the verses that follow.

Assyria has been like a vast swarm of locusts, multiplied over the whole face of the earth. However, while locusts can devour the land and cause considerable destruction, the locusts in such a vast swarm can vanish without a trace. While the Neo-Assyrian Empire may have covered much of the face of the known world, its time would soon pass and it would be nowhere to be found.

The final two verses of the chapter and of the book present us with a mocking dirge for Assyria and its rulers. The king and his nobles, the nobles here being described like shepherds, slumber while their people are scattered like an unguarded flock. Perhaps we should see the slumbering of the king and the nobles as a drunken stupor from which they cannot rouse themselves.

They have been intoxicated by the wine of the Lord's judgment. The Lord's judgment upon Nineveh is a final one. There's no recovery from it.

The response of the other nations is to rejoice over Nineveh's downfall. There was virtually no land that had not suffered from the Assyrians' cruelty, but now its violence was coming back upon its own head. A question to consider, what are some of the characteristics of the Lord's judgment and justice that can be illustrated in the downfall of Nineveh? Matthew chapter 10 verses 24 to 42 If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household? So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me.

Whoever finds his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it. Whoever receives you, receives me.

And whoever receives me, receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet, will receive a prophet's reward. And the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person, will receive a righteous person's reward.

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. The second half of Matthew chapter 10 continues the themes of the first. Faithful followers of Christ should expect to suffer persecution on account of their association with him.

If Christ was accused of being beelzebub, casting out demons by the power of the devil, his disciples should expect even worse accusations to be hurled at them. So have no fear of them. It's a surprising teaching to come next.

But persecution is part of the harvest process by which wheat and chaff are revealed for what they are, by which people are separated. It's an essential aspect of their mission. Persecution reveals things and hearts for what they really are.

The charge not to fear also introduces the command to declare openly what Christ has declared in private. Open proclamation will be the first thing to fall by the wayside in the case of fear. And the point here isn't merely that of not being afraid, it's a calling to be positively bold.

The 12 need proclaim their message without fear and without trepidation. We should not fear because persecution associates us with our master and our master is greater than any persecutor. They cannot kill the soul, only the body.

And if God notices even the falling sparrow, how much more will he notice his children who lay down their lives in his service? Every single hair on our heads is numbered and not one of them will be lost without God knowing. If we confess Christ before men, he will confess us before his father in heaven. Throughout Jesus' teaching here, he's focusing first of all upon our association with him, upon God's notice of us and the attention that he pays to us, upon the way that he will bear witness to us before his father as we bear witness before men of him.

And with all of this, upon the fact that persecution is not an accident. Persecution is something that in God's providence is part of the process of bringing things to light, of achieving the harvest. Christ brings division into families themselves.

Our closest relatives may turn upon us. Persecution isn't just from the wider culture but can be those closest to us that can be our greatest enemies. Jesus' disciples will experience the pain of ostracization and betrayal.

And in a society where your family was at the heart of all your networks of relations and support, your business, your social recognition, your children's chances of getting married, all these sorts of things are on the line. If you follow Christ, you might be rejected from the fundamental structure of your society. And this could be absolutely devastating in that particular day and age.

But Jesus brings the sword in order to bring peace. Division must occur in order that something new might be created. Christ declares that those who do not take up their crosses and follow him are not worthy of him.

And we should feel the force of this statement. The symbol of the cross has been dulled for us. When we see it, we see something that can be found on someone's necklace or used in expressions such as, my cross to bear.

It can easily be forgotten that this is an instrument of torture and execution, not dissimilar to something like a guillotine or an electric chair. And it has a visceral force to

it. People would have seen bodies hanging on crosses, rebels who were being crucified for their rebellion, and bandits and other people who have been put on these crosses, left to die in the most extreme agony.

And there to be mocked and humiliated, stripped of their clothing and presented as outcasts of society, there to be gazed upon and ridiculed. It was a symbol of the most utter expulsion from society. Society extricating a person from itself in the most excruciating of spectacles.

And this is what disciples were supposed to move towards, to take up their crosses and to walk on the path towards execution. And this would be a following of Christ. This is the first time within the gospels we have an intimation of the way in which Christ will later die.

For all those who follow him, however, they will find their lives. Much as he is risen from the dead, they too will be raised to life eternal. And as people follow Jesus, Jesus identifies with them.

Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. There's an extension of the principle to the person who receives prophets and righteous persons. They will receive the reward of the person that they have received.

That promise of those who give a cup of cold water to a person on account of their being a disciple, that they will by no means lose their reward. This is something that draws our mind forward to Matthew 25. Again, it's a test of hospitality, and it's premised upon Christ's deep association with his people.

We can think about this in relation to the statement that Jesus makes to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul saw, why do you persecute me? The head associates with the sufferings of his body. He recognizes those people as his own, and their sufferings as his sufferings.

A question to consider. This chapter says a lot about whom we should fear and whom we should not fear. And elsewhere in the New Testament, the idea of fear as a means of control is something that is explored.

How does Christ release us from the power of fear? And how can we live in the freedom that he has given us from fear? How is fear presented as the antithesis of faith, hope and love within the New Testament? How can we live lives that are marked by an absence of the fear that Christ warns us against here?