

No Turning Back – Nahum

Small Books - The Book of Nahum

25th November 2007

If you take a trip to the British Museum you will be able to see a whole section of artefacts from Assyria. There are whole rooms dedicated to this because archaeologists have found so much material. Some of this material demonstrates what a powerful nation the Assyrians must have been. For a start as you enter the Assyrian section you will walk between two huge winged bulls which would have stood at the entrance to one of the royal palaces. As you go through these you enter the inside of the palace where reliefs that would have been the wallpaper of royal palace tell the stories of various battles that the Assyrians won. It would seem that the Assyrians were very proud of their fighting strength. If you arrange it in advance with the British Museum you can go into a room where there are reliefs of the Assyrian lion hunts which are carved in striking detail, as are those of the battles.

Assyria was a very powerful nation. It would seem that they had very powerful armies and they seemed to be after world domination. They ruthlessly overturned city after city, nation after nation and so the Assyrian Empire grew and grew. They conquered Israel and they had attacked Judah with a degree of success and it looked likely they would eventually take over Judah too.

All of this made Assyria a proud nation who thought that they were indestructible. Assyria's capital city was Nineveh. We know a little of Nineveh from the book of Jonah. In the book of Jonah it is described as 'a great city'. It's not surprising that Nineveh was a great city given the size of the Assyrian empire and the wealth that they must have accumulated. It is said that Nineveh was one of the greatest cities in the world at this time.

God had sent Jonah to Nineveh 100-150 years before this to warn the people of their destruction because of their wickedness. As we know from the story of Jonah, the people turned and repented. Their repentance must have been sincere because the Lord God decided not to punish them after all.

But 100 years on, it seems that they have gone back to their old ways and God is very angry with them again. He speaks again to them through the prophet Nahum.

Nahum's name when translated means "Full of comfort" – That's obvious from the text isn't it? It is thought by some that it may be short for Nehemiah, which means "Yahweh is full of comfort" – Again, you can see that from the passage.

God is so angry with the Assyrians that twice he says "I am against you" (2:13, 3:5) or in the NLT it is translated "I am your enemy". (comforting words)

In verse 3 Nahum reminds us that God is slow to anger (1:3) but don't mistake God's slowness to get angry for him not caring about what we are doing or that God is a pushover. Nahum also reminds of the greatness of God's power (1:3-6)

His way is in the whirlwind and the storm,
and clouds are the dust of his feet.

4 He rebukes the sea and dries it up;
he makes all the rivers run dry.
Bashan and Carmel wither
and the blossoms of Lebanon fade.

5 The mountains quake before him
and the hills melt away.
The earth trembles at his presence,
the world and all who live in it.

6 Who can withstand his indignation?
Who can endure his fierce anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire;
the rocks are shattered before him.

In verse 3 he says "...the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished" (1:3)

How you feel about all of this really depends on what side of the fence you are on. For the Assyrians and particularly for Nineveh, this was really bad news. To hear that God was their enemy was bad news. If God told me he was my enemy, I would be pretty scared. And to be reminded of the greatness of his power only added to the bad news. The verses we just looked at where Nahum describes how God can rebuke the sea and it simply dries up and the mountains quake before him. This is a God to be feared – by now you should be scared!

But let's go down to verse 12.

This is what the LORD says:
"Although they have allies and are numerous,
they will be cut off and pass away.
Although I have afflicted you, O Judah ,
I will afflict you no more.

13 Now I will break their yoke from your neck
and tear your shackles away."

For Judah these verses came as a source of great comfort. Judah had been oppressed by the Assyrians for years (see 2 Kings 18). This was really good news for Judah. Finally the Assyrians were going to get what's coming to them.

The Assyrians had been the enemy of many nations and had wiped the floor with the lot of them. What chance did Judah have? There was no hope really, the Assyrians were simply too strong and their armies too numerous. Eventually Judah would be taken over by them too. But what was that news? The Assyrians have made an enemy of God? Oh did they choose the wrong guy to pick on. Now I know we're in England and we are in a Baptist church but if I had read those verses out in a black Pentecostal church, I expect I would have got a few "hallelujahs" and "praise the Lord". I guess that's how the people of Judah would have felt when they heard about God's anger and when they were reminded of his strength.

"God is angry with the Assyrians" – "Oh yes!"

"He is their enemy" – "Their enemy"

"His power is great" – "He's great in Power"

"He rebukes the sea and it simply dries up" – "Hallelujah"

"The mountains shake in his presence" – "Mighty God"

"Who can stand his indignation?" – "Not one!"

"Who can endure his fierce anger?" – "His fierce anger!"

"The rocks are shattered before him" – "blown to bits!"

*"Though they are unscathed and numerous, the Assyrians will be cut down" –
Hallelujah, Praise the Lord!"*

And then the worship band start playing and we go into a song of celebration. God's wrath and anger and his mighty strength that were a terrifying prospect for the Assyrians was a real comfort to Judah.

If you think of yourself as being a righteous person then I guess these words of God's judgement on the wicked will be rather good news for you. (God's judgement was really good news for Judah.) If however, like most of us, you are aware of sin in your own life, and the need for God's mercy and forgiveness, then I guess these words are a little difficult to swallow.

This is a bit like Psalm 23 when David says "your rod and staff comfort me". The rod is a beating stick so how could that bring comfort? Well it all depends on who it is used against. If David had viewed this as something God would use to strike him, then it would not be a comfort, but as something that would be used to beat off his enemies it is a great source of comfort as it means protection.

In Nineveh's story we see that God has unbelievable patience. We see a God who is reaching out to Nineveh. Sending Jonah to warn them. We are given the idea of how evil Nineveh are because Jonah doesn't want them to be saved, he wants them destroyed. But Jonah knows that God is a God of grace and unbelievable patience and so of course, Jonah doesn't want to go. Eventually of course, Nineveh repent and God spares them. But now 100 years on, they have turned back to their old ways and God is not best pleased.

Now God is sending another prophet, Nahum, to tell them of their destruction. Perhaps again this is the Lord giving them another chance to repent. Only they don't and 50 years after this warning, Nineveh is destroyed.

God is a God who pours out his grace on us, time and time again. He is always ready to accept us when we repent.

In Luke 15 Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. It ends:

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:7)

And then the story of the lost coin. Again it ends:

I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)

Following that, in case you didn't get the point, Jesus tells another parable about a lost son.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Repentance is to turn away from something completely. And that means that we should not be going back to it again. Sometimes are our lives a bit like Nineveh? Do we hear God's prompting about things that are wrong in our lives? And for a while we feel the weight of our guilt and we realise how far from God we have wandered. Then we repent, and perhaps it is a genuine repentance. But then as time goes on, we find that we slip back into our old ways and we are asking forgiveness once again for the very same thing that we repented of.

As I have said before I don't see God as a God of thunder bolts waiting to get us. I see a God of covenant love for us who is desperate to be close to us, who wants us to be with him in heaven where he can speak to us face to face. But there is a danger that we can take all of this for granted and in doing so we view God as being soft.

It would do us some good to remember that God is a powerful God:

1:9 Why are you scheming against the Lord?
He will destroy you with one blow;
he won't need to strike twice!

As I said last week, Jesus came in order to remove the barriers between us and God, certainly not to give us a licence to do more evil.

God's patience is more than we can fathom. His love for us is greater than we can ever understand. When we are heading in the right direction we need to try to stay heading in the right direction. It's difficult sometimes not to go back to our old ways. It feels like there is a bungee rope tied to you constantly trying to pull you back. Paul talks about it being a struggle.

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:13-14)

Paul says we have to forget the things that are behind us and strain towards the goal. Are there things of the past that are holding you back? Perhaps there are regrets about things that have been done or not done. Sometimes it is difficult to forgive ourselves. We can learn something from our past mistakes but we need to try not to let them hold us back. Are there things that you have tried to put behind you that you feel are tempting you back again? Paul says we need to stay focused on the goal, keep that prize in mind and that will spur us on to keep going. Yes, it's a strain and a struggle at times but it will all be worth it in the end.

We have been saved from death and the punishment that our sins deserve and have been brought into a relationship with God. Let's try not to be like Nineveh, going back to our old ways, where God might say to us "I am your enemy". Let's instead press on towards the goal and with every ounce of strength within us fight to maintain our relationship with God. Then instead of being called 'God's enemy' as John tells us, we can be called 'children of God'.